

Meant to Be Yours: A Jason Dean Retelling

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Fandoms:	Heathers: The Musical - Murphy & O'Keefe , Heathers (1988) , Heathers (TV)
Relationships:	Jason "J. D." Dean/Veronica Sawyer , Heather McNamara/Veronica Sawyer , Jason "J. D." Dean/Original Character(s)
Characters:	Jason "J. D." Dean , Veronica Sawyer , Heather Chandler (Heathers) , Heather McNamara , Heather Duke , Kurt Kelly , Ram Sweeney , Martha Dunnstock , Bud Dean (Heathers) , Jason "J. D." Dean's Mother , Pauline Fleming , Original Characters , Veronica Sawyer's Parents
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by [sadcatjae](#)

Summary

Heathers, but from JD's POV.

“You and me,” I growl against her hungry mouth. “We’re gonna raze this world to the ground and rebuild it the way we want. We are god. Our love is god. And nothing can touch us.”

“We are god,” she echoes in a shivering breath, and Sherwood gently ceases to exist.

[SPORADIC UPDATES]

Notes

I'll be taking some liberties here and there but will generally follow the main plotline (unless I change my mind). Some major plot points might appear in different places in the timeline for cohesion/logistics, so scenes you might recognise from the movie and/or musical might happen differently. Dialogue will be taken from both the musical and the film, and some will be changed to suit this story. My characterisations are solely my HC, so please don't compare them to the film/musical. They are my interpretation, as are the events of JD & Veronica's relationship. Also take note that my portrayal of JD can be *very* triggering and unpleasant, so erm be warned?

On an important note - I do not condone JD's toxic and abusive behaviour. JD and Veronica's relationship is not a healthy one!

Please heed CWs at the start of each chapter.

I'll update whenever I update i.e. please don't expect a regular schedule.

Chapter 1: two minutes

CW: Explicit language, physical abuse, suicidality, self-harm

“I’m gonna need you.”

I had that dream again last night. The one where I’m staring at mom waving at me from the library window and I can’t do anything but wave back, even though I know what’s going to happen in two minutes.

Two minutes. A hundred and twenty seconds. They never feel longer than they do in this dream. Two minutes stretch into an aeon and a half, until I’m sure that we’ve been waving to each other since the moment I gained cognition. And mom’s never looked more deranged, smiling like a madwoman, waving faster and faster like she’s trying to scrub a hole in the glass.

I know what’s going to happen. And when the timer finally runs down, I watch her explode along with the building in all its gory, gruesome detail. I don’t think it’s how it actually happened. It’s impossible for one frail human body to produce so much blood and viscera, but there’s no way of knowing. Time is a runaway train barreling towards a sheer cliff -- and it’s a one way trip to the bottom.

“Did you hear me?” A large hand slams into the table, jerking me out of my trance. The cereal bowl upends and milk pools across the battered wood. “I’m gonna need you today.”

I watch the white lake current over the tableside and feel nothing. “You wanna take your hand out of my breakfast?”

Bud Dean scowls and grabs me by the nape, sticky fingers digging deep into my flesh like painful pincers. The stench of booze is overpowering, even this early in the morning. “Moore Avenue. You’ll go straight there after school. I need you there at four on the dot. *Four. On. The. Fuckin’. Dot.* You understand me, *son?*”

I grit my teeth against the pain. “I’ll be there, *dad*,” I seethe.

“*Good*,” Bud grunts, and releases me with a violent shove. I fall from my seat and crash into the wall, much to his amusement. “Four on the dot. Not a minute later or I’m sellin’ that bike of yours for scrap metal.”

Caustic retort rises sharply in my gullet and I have to bite my tongue to keep it from surging out. I’m not looking for a beatdown for breakfast.

Sherwood, Ohio is twenty other places I’ve been - or maybe those twenty places are all Sherwood, Ohio. Regardless, it’s just another suburban hellhole; a carbon copy of a carbon copy.

As I ride through the wide boroughs flanked by perfect white houses and emerald green lawns, I don't feel stirred by anything I see. I don't feel stirred by anything these days.

I think maybe that's why I like to ride. It's the closest thing to dying I can do that's not actively dying. There's a real thrill in it. Even when the world's just a blur, everything sharpens and the air is crisper and your stagnant organs are suddenly pumped full of hot red blood. It's like the blinders are off for that one sweet moment and I can almost pretend that everything is okay. I'm just another brain in a bodysuit that's working on the same network as everyone else.

I pull into Westerburg High School and park my bike around the side of the school, away from the main cluster of students making their way inside.

Jesus fucking Christ. It's all the same. The same building design. The same beige paint. The same gummy stairs and penny-thin windows that rattle from the slightest breeze.

It gives me vertigo and I have to lean against the wall to breathe the dizzy away. When my legs stop shaking, I slip a cigarette between my lips. Light it up. *Which brand of asshole will I encounter today?*

"Veronica!"

An ear-piercing shriek draws my attention to the parking lot. There's a real swanky red convertible pulling into a free park in the reserved section for teachers. Three girls, dressed like traffic lights, hop out of the car. From the driver's seat, there's a less dazzling figure wearing a long navy skirt and a blue denim jacket. I can't stop staring, captivated by the way she carries herself with sure strides and a half-cocked smile. She's everything we're not, and she knows it.

The girl - *Veronica* - tosses the car keys to the blonde in red. I don't linger much on the latter, or her traffic light goons. No. My eyes stay locked on Veronica. The intriguing anomaly in a sea of mundanity.

They make their way through the parking lot and their voices are carried by the wind, gifting me snatches of conversation. The blonde's shrill voice strikes a nerve that's lain dormant since my last school. I take a hard drag, letting the burn coast my lungs and soothe my rising irritation.

Veronica's voice on the other hand - low, cool, and wry. It matches her perfectly.

The blonde flips her hair and her goons follow suit - their skirts flouncing about with every arrogant clomp of their heels. Veronica rolls her eyes and trails behind, raking a hand through her curly brown hair.

I wonder what it might feel like. Soft, definitely. Soft and lush and beautiful against my fingertips. It'd be almost criminal for my rough calloused hands to handle such delicate locks.

The cigarette burns down to my fingers. I let the ember sit there for a moment, letting the heat sting, before dropping it to the ground and crushing it under my boot.

It only took two minutes to finish my cigarette. But it felt like an aeon and a half.

Chapter 2: greetings and salutations

Chapter Summary

a fight(?), lime Slurpee, and the inevitable brain freeze

Chapter Notes

CW: Explicit language, homophobic slur, misogynist slur, suicidality, self-harm, ableist language, violence.

“You shouldn’t have bowed down to the swatch dogs and diet cokeheads. They’re going to crush that girl.”

Veronica turns around, startling at my presence. “I’m sorry, what?” Behind her, a bespectacled brunette (Mary? Martha?) leaves the cafeteria, looking bright-eyed and giddy.

I just witnessed Veronica forge a note at the behest of her 'friends' and lie to Martha's face about its origins. Took me by surprise. I didn't realise how gutless Veronica could be, souring my first impressions of her.

Even so. Her dark, depthless eyes pins me to the spot and for a moment, it feels like I'm a thousand feet underwater.

I glance down at my book. I don’t remember which line I was reading. “You've clearly got a soul," I say, raising my eyes to her wry expression. "You just need to work harder on keeping it clean. 'We are all born marked for evil'."

Fuck. I can't concentrate with her just standing there. I get up and leave my lunch tray untouched.

She grabs the back of my coat as I walk past, forcing me to a stop. “Are you really gonna quote Baudelaire at me and then just walk away?” That half-cocked smile makes an appearance, hooking the corner of her mouth. I stare, a little dazed. “I didn’t catch your name.”

“I didn’t throw it,” I say automatically, and tug my coat free from her grasp.

There’s a glint in her dark eyes, like amusement - or something more. My heart stutters. There’s a thrill - the same thrill I get when I ride. Only this time, the world’s static and I’m

the one moving so fast I'm nothing but a blur.

"Hey, sweetheart!"

In my periphery, two immense bodies invade my personal space. I turn to sidestep, but they're too fast. Taller than tall. Bigger than big. And dumber than a pair of rocks. *Jocks*.

One of them - the shorter of the two - slams his chest into me. I would have gone flying if not for the other jock boxing me in. "What did your boyfriend say when you told him you were moving to Sherwood, Ohio? *Huh?*"

I glare at him, not bothering to respond.

The taller one raps my head painfully. "My buddy Kurt just asked you a question."

"Hey, Ram. Doesn't the cafeteria have a 'no fags allowed' rule?"

I dog ear the page before closing my book. "I don't know what your problem is," I say to Kurt, all friendly like. "But I bet it's *really* hard for you to pronounce."

Kurt's face goes through a myriad of colours, before settling on red. "Grab his fuckin' arms!" he hollers and throws a wild punch in my direction.

Moving every half year or so means that I'm always the new kid. Which means that I'm always getting into fights - usually initiated by knuckle-dragging mouth breathers like Kurt and Ram here. The perks of daily beatdowns means that I've had to learn to defend myself -- and every shot that lands, lucky or otherwise, is hard-earned and hard-won.

In a moment that feels both like forever and a second, Kurt and Ram are rolling around on the ground, groaning and grunting as they clutch their various hurts. I shake out my bruised knuckles, joints already swelling.

The roar of blood dies and I realise a crowd's formed, tens of faces gleefully staring at the three of us like they've got ringside seats to a high stakes boxing match. There are jeers and laughs at the jocks' demise. Some appear disappointed at how quickly the fight transpired.

Veronica's there too. Watching me with that darkly amused look in her eyes. And then she turns and disappears into the crowd.

I think that one look did more to ruin me than a beatdown ever could.

A teacher comes hollering, effectively scattering the crowd like spooked chickens, and I slip away into the bathroom to wash the blood off my hands.

In the grimy mirror above the sink, my reflection hovers like a sullen ghoul. Black trench. Pallid skin. Dark shadows under taxidermy eyes. It's a miracle I'm still standing.

I light a cigarette and the smoke obscures my reflection, turning me into a hazy smear.

A nerdy kid with coke bottle glasses wanders into the bathroom and immediately advises me that smoking's disallowed indoors. Instead of butting out my cigarette, I offer him one and strike up a friendly conversation.

Coke Bottle is taken aback, but he bravely takes the proffered gift and pretends to smoke. Through him, I learn a bit more about the social hierarchy of Westerburg High.

At the top of the ladder, there's Heather Chandler, the leader of the Traffic Light Trio. There's not much to say about her except that she is ostensibly far more terrifying than Stalin, Hitler, and Pol Pot put together.

The brunette who's a penchant for eye-watering yellow is the friendlier of the three, purported to have less in her head than a hollowed out coconut. Heather McNamara, Coke Bottle calls her, and he blushes when he babbles about her asking him for an eraser during Maths two weeks ago.

And the one who has a taste for green blazers and an even greener eye on the throne: Heather Duke. Surprisingly bookish, but just as loathsome as the other two.

Everyone else is just noise in the wind. Inconsequential. Irrelevant. Background characters that should be grateful to even cross paths with the Heathers.

Just hearing about them sets my teeth on edge. They make my skin crawl. I've known Heathers in every school I've the misfortune of transferring to, and each iteration is *always* worse than the last.

When I ask about Veronica, Coke Bottle reveals that she's only just started hanging out with the Heathers. Before that, she was her own person, floating through Westerberg like everyone else.

I don't see Veronica in my next class and figure that she's playing hooky with her merry band of bitches, so I decide to do as they do in Westerberg and skip class too.

I don't need to travel too far to find the familiar sign greeting me from the side of a busy road. Every time I step into one a 7-Eleven, an indescribable relief washes over me. Like I've been holding my breath this entire time and only now just letting it go. As soon as I step inside, I make a beeline for the back of the store for my most potent drug of choice.

"Greetings and salutations. You want a Slurpee with that?"

She blinks in surprise, a packet of corn nuts clutched tightly in her hands. I wonder, with some amusement, whether our conversations will always prelude with her startling.

When she processes my words, a smirk slowly grows on her face. "No," she quips, "but if you're nice, I'll let you buy me a Big Gulp."

I furrow my brow. "That's like going to micky dees and ordering a salad," I say, with no small modicum of disgust. "Slurpee's the signature dish of the house. Now, did you say

cherry or lime?" I lean forward over the counter. The moment our eyes meet, a spark of electricity zips down my spine.

Her smile widens. "I said Big Gulp." A petite hand enters my vision, proffered for a shake. "I'm Veronica, by the way. Veronica Sawyer."

I take her hand and silently wonder at how small it is within mine. "Jason Dean. JD, for short."

Her grip is surprisingly strong, but not aggressively so.

She lets go much too quickly and pilfers a Red Vine while the attendant has his back turned. "So, JD. That thing you pulled in the caf' was pretty severe."

"Well, the extreme always seems to make an impression," I say, taking a sip of icy limey goodness.

"What's a Baudelaire-quoting badass like you doing in Sherwood, Ohio?"

"My dad's work." My expression sours and it's not just the Slurpee. "He owns a deconstruction company."

"*De*-construction?" She raises a brow, taken aback.

People usually are. No-one ever really thinks about what happens to a building after it's been built. A building's supposed to be immortal. A permanent fixture in their little bubbles of reality. Big Bud Dean is the kind of insecure prick who likes to go around and destroy that fragile sense of security.

"The old man enjoys tearing things down," I shrug, absently pressing my sore knuckles against the cold Slurpee cup. "Have you seen the commercial? 'My name's Big Bud Dean! If it's in the way, I'll make your day.'"

"I know the one! He pushes the plunger and the screen blows up, right?" Mirth degrades into mortification. "...*That's* your dad?"

"In all his toxic glory."

She gives a sympathetic hum. "You know, everyone's life has got static. For example, I don't like my friends."

We both glance out the window and see the Heathers waiting in the red convertible. Chandler is snapping at Duke about something inane I'm sure, while McNamara fixes her makeup in the rearview mirror.

"I don't really like your friends either," I tell Veronica, and she chuckles. "Headed somewhere?"

"We've got a party at Remington," she says, a tad dourly. "It's a bit of a drive so..."

“Bag the party - hang here.”

Veronica glances around the store, eyebrows raised. “At the 7-Eleven? Swanky first date.”

“Hey,” I say, defensively. “I love this place.”

“Most guys prefer the bowling alley or the movies.”

I can't help but smile and expose a sliver of teeth. She blinks and smirks back.

“I’ve been moved around all my life,” I explain, twisting the straw between my fingers.

“Dallas, Baton Rouge, Vegas, Sherwood Ohio. No matter where I go, there’s always a 7-Eleven. Any town, any time, I can pop a Ham and Cheese in the microwave and have me a large lime Slurpee. Keeps me sane.”

“Does your mommy know you eat all this crap?”

“Not anymore,” I say, detachedly. “It’s just dad and me now.”

She winces. “That must be rough, always being on the move. Can’t imagine how a Slurpee could be of much help.”

I offer her mine, waggling it right under her nose. “Wanna give it a try?”

Our eyes lock over the cup when she accepts it. The air is suddenly liquid metal, weighing me down and invading my lungs, making it difficult to breathe.

Veronica takes a healthy sip and her face contorts in pain. *Brain freeze.*

“*Son of a bitch!*” she yelps a laugh, rubbing her temple. “Yeah. I think I get it.”

“I knew you would,” I say, indulgently.

“Thanks for the experience.”

“Anytime,” I grin, and take my cup back. “You know where to find me if you want to score another hit.”

A car horn blares, jerking us back to reality. I glance out the window and Chandler's punching the wheel like it's offended her. Even from this distance, we can both clearly hear her shrieks to *'hurry up and buy the fucking corn nuts'*.

“Shit. I gotta go.” Veronica sighs and hastily makes the purchase. “See you around, Mr. Badass.”

My gaze lingers on her as she climbs into the convertible and drives out of the parking lot. It lingers for a long time after.

Brain freeze hits like a sledgehammer, but for once, it does nothing to clear my head.

Chapter 3: deconstruction

Chapter Summary

kaboom, a flashback, and an intruder.

Chapter Notes

CW: Explicit language, sexual content (non-explicit), violence, physical abuse, PTSD flashbacks/panic attacks, disassociation.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The familiar uninspired logo (*Big Bud Dean Construction*) is plastered on the fences sectioning off the site. I kick out the stand for my bike and leave it sitting under a tree and take a moment to survey the condemned building. My heart sinks to the pit of my stomach.

It's a goddamn library.

He hasn't pulled this shit on me since Boston - not after I went for a joyride in the bulldozer and almost ran him over. Yeah, he really pulled back on me for a while after that. There wasn't a day when he didn't give me a bug-eyed look, like I was teetering on the verge of snapping again and committing patricide.

Either Big Bud Dean is desperate for workers, or he's dumber than I give him credit for. Most likely a combination of both.

I'm contemplating getting on my bike and pissing off to Remington, when I see the big man himself walking towards me with a spare hardhat under his arm. Taking stock of the other workers milling around him, I note that there's far less guys than there should be for a building this size.

"You're early!" he barks, thumping the hardhat into my chest.

I don't bother to catch it when it drops to my feet. "What, you're gonna punish me for being early now?"

A vein visibly pulses in Bud's forehead and he flexes, as though he were tempted to finish what the jocks started. "Get your ass on site. I need you to do the final checks with Hudson."

"This is a library."

“It is.” A dangerous note enters his voice and the glint in his eyes effectively shuts me up. It’s the same look he gets when he’s about to lose his temper. As bad as my temper is, Big Bud Dean’s is hair-trigger.

Sweat springs to my pores, anger taking a sharp veer into fear. I slip off my trench and hang it over the handlebars of my bike, and the grey flannel follows suit. “I would have thought Boston had made a bigger impression on you.”

“You pull that kind of bullshit here and I won’t bother bailin’ your ass outta jail,” Bud seethes through an ugly scowl. “*Get. Movin’.*”

From the moment I was old enough to carry my own weight, Big Bud Dean’s got me working on his demolition sites whenever he’s a guy short. He’s a cheap ass and would much rather indulge in free child labor than fork out for extra help.

I go through the same motions. It’s a process I know like the back of my hand. Hudson’s a hard worker, so he’s already got the explosives packed in nice and tight. All that’s left are the final checks to ensure that the building’s gonna *implode* rather than explode and thereby blowing up the entire neighborhood. Although, I suppose that’s not such a terrible idea.

This is the easy part. By now, the guys would have done most of the work dismantling what they can and installing the explosives. There’s two zones of explosions for a building this size. Bigger than most suburban libraries, but then again this is a wealthy area.

The real work starts after the building comes down. We gotta knock down what’s left standing and move the debris into the trucks using excavators and skid-steer loaders. With a team this small, it’s gonna take all week.

We gather outside in the safe zone, and everyone’s hardhatted, masked up, and buzzing with anticipation.

I lean against my bike, taking a smoke break, and try not to watch the fireworks. But it never fails to grab my attention anyway - holding me hostage until the last bone-rattling rumble dies and dust clouds plume in the air in a thick, umber fog.

Kaboom.

It happens quick. Always does.

There’s a roar in my head. A pressure that intensifies until I’m sure my eardrums are gonna burst. There are flashes in my vision, white lightning like someone’s taking photos, and I can’t feel my hands or my face, they’d gone numb numb numb like the rest of me.

And there she is, waving at me from the window, and the comic falls – no, it’s my cigarette, smoking away in the grass, and I wonder hysterically if I’m gonna explode too – and *she’s* there, waving, just fucking waving because she’s *ecstatic* to get to where she’s going which is six feet under and in hell, but she doesn’t realise she’s throwing me away, leaving me to pick up the pieces (fragment, *splinters*, so goddamn microscopic) with *Big Bud Dean*–

I blink and I'm straddling Hudson, throwing my fist into his face over and over again. He must've said something to piss me off, because I wouldn't hit Hudson without good reason. It's *Hudson*. The guy likes the same trash music I do and he buys me a bottle of whiskey even when I'm low on cash. He's the only guy working for Bud that I can tolerate. So he's gotta have said something bad if I'm pummeling him into a pulpy, bloody mess like this – he's *gotta*–

Bud kicks me off Hudson and it's my turn getting pummeled, every strike slamming into me like a brick, and all I can do is curl up on the ground and cover my head. The most pathetic noises accompany Bud's fury but I don't have mind enough to cringe. The pain is overwhelming, blazing deep into my bones like fire. And even though Bud's screaming in my ear and stomping me over and over like he's trying to get rid of vermin, it's not him that I see. It's not mom either. It's brown curls and dark eyes and a half-cocked smile that ruins me far more than a beatdown ever could.

The rest of the day goes by in a haze. I don't remember coming home. I don't remember ever stepping into the shower, but there's cold water beating down on me and I'm shivering like I've been standing here for hours.

I step out of the stall on wobbly legs and stare at myself in the mirror. It hardly feels like me. My skin's a mottled mess of angry bruises, purples and blues and yellows clashing together in a brilliant tattoo of colors. I'm pretty sure my ribs are cracked but there's not much I can do about it.

Under the sad mop of dripping hair, grey eyes return my stare with uncanny detachment.

This face belongs to a dead woman.

A surge of repulsion forces me away. Big Bud Dean must be out drinking again, probably trying to coax Hudson after he got beat to shit by a teenager, so I at least have the house to myself for the next few hours.

I grab my tattered copy of *The Flowers of Evil* and try to read in bed but I keep getting stuck on the same line. Veronica hovers at the fore of my frazzled mind - right there under the spotlight, the star of the goddamn show. Audience of one. And I'm *enraptured*.

Baudelaire talked about this contradiction: the horror of life and the ecstasy of life. I never used to understand this because there never was any contradiction for me. Life has always been pretty straightforward. Then along came Veronica Sawyer, and now I think I understand too well.

I wake to my window sliding open. I'm trapped by the thick mires of sleep, and by the time I reach the surface, the intruder's already inside.

"Who...?" I slur, groggily raising myself onto an elbow.

The intruder stumbles into my desk, cursing quietly, and that voice - that low and all-too-recognisable voice - freezes the very blood in my veins.

Lamplight floods the room in a warm honeyed glow, illuminating several unpacked boxes, a book laden desk, and not much else.

“...Veronica?” I stare at her, blankly. “What are you doing in my room?”

She’s even more beautiful than when I last saw her. Maybe it’s the way her hair’s gone absolutely wild or the way her deep features are touched with a drunken flush. Maybe it’s her crooked grin, which holds a thread of steely determination.

Veronica’s wearing a different outfit this time. A crumpled blue skirt, thigh-high socks, and a matching blue blazer that’s stained with either vomit or booze. She’s dressed just like a Heather, but she does it way better.

“I had to see you,” she says, fixing the books she’d knocked askew on my desk. “Sorry for waking you up.”

“How did you know where I live?” I swing my legs over the side of my bed, suppressing a wince when my ribs twinge in protest.

“Sherwood’s not such a big town.”

We stare at each other for a moment. Her, smiling in coy amusement. Me, probably looking as blank and confused as I feel. The intensity of her stare drags me into its dangerous depths, and I have to tear my eyes away to save myself.

"What happened to your face?" she asks, curiously.

“If you’re fiending for a lime Slurpee, I’m afraid I’m all out.”

“I am fiending, but not for that.”

She sits down beside me and boldly grabs my hand. I flinch instinctively, but she keeps a firm grip. Something must’ve broke, because my heart’s racing and it doesn’t calm down, even though she’s just holding my hand. I feel unsteady. *Scared.*

“...Veronica?” My voice comes out pitifully small and this time, I have the mind to cringe.

“I want to have sex.”

Oh.

The rusty cogs in my brain judder to a stop.

Wait, what?

Veronica must have noticed my expression, because she launches into an explanation of what had transpired at the party. Seems like she’s made herself a social pariah in just one night -

which is an impressive feat but also inevitable, considering her blatant defiance against the demon queen of Westerburg.

“Goddamn,” I breathe when she finishes talking.

“I’ve always treated Heather’s teen queen power plays as bullshit,” Veronica says bitterly, leaning into my side. She smells like booze and cigarettes - not unpleasantly so. “But I’m really scared. Who am I going to eat lunch with on Monday? God, I sound like an Afterschool Special.”

“Does that really matter?” I probe, frowning. “Why go through all this bullshit just to reserve a seat in the cafeteria?”

“You know why, JD. Not all of us can be Baudelaire-quoting badasses like you.” She gives me a sweet smile that makes my stomach flip. “You know, I almost moved into high school out of sixth grade because I was some kinda genius. We all decided to chuck the idea because I’d have trouble making friends, blah blah blah. Now blah blah blah is all I do. I use my grand IQ to figure out what gloss to wear and how to hit three keggers before curfew. Some genius.”

“Heather Chandler is one bitch that deserves to die.”

“Killing her won’t solve anything,” Veronica sighs, resting her cheek on my shoulder.

“A well-timed lightning bolt through her window and Monday morning, the Heathers, shit, *everybody* would be cast fucking adrift.”

“Well then, I’ll pray for rain.”

“It’s easier than you think it is, ending a life.”

She lifts her head and raises a brow. “Are you speaking from experience, Mr. Badass?”

I huff a laugh and give it up. Murder isn’t the most romantic of conversations. “I guess I don’t know what the hell I’m talking about.”

“I know exactly what the hell you’re talking about and you’re right, you don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.” Veronica swings her leg over my lap and straddles me, arms ringing my neck. She brings her face close. So close, I can count every eyelash. “Let’s just grow up, be adults, and die.”

“Good plan,” I say, grasping her waist. My hands fit perfectly in the curves of her flesh. *God, she’s so warm.*

The corner of Veronica’s mouth hooks upwards. Her gaze darkens in stirring desire. “But before that, I’d like to see Heather Chandler puke her guts out.”

We both laugh as our lips meet, and she pushes me onto my back.

I experience the full breadth of life. The very borders of my existence, so fortified and distinct, are brutally torn down and invaded by another. Precious, heady ecstasy in my submission to her will - my flesh formed by hers, her flesh formed by mine. The most potent anesthetic. I think, *oh, oh, so this is what they're all talking about?* and there's a pang of regret that it took me this fucking long to figure it out.

Afterwards, she rests quietly in my arms and traces the ugly bruises on my chest with her fingertips. Her touch is feathery light and the tiny sparks of pain they produce are exquisite.

"Ram and Kurt?" she asks, softly.

"Sure," I say, and even though she doesn't believe me, she just kisses my jaw and nestles in my arms.

Chapter End Notes

I write purely with UK English spelling, but you may notice some words with the US spelling. Please ignore the inconsistencies. Autocorrect is a bitch and I'll find the time at some point to go back and fix them. Also, 'mom' will always be spelt 'mom' because it seems more fitting, even if I do use UK spelling for everything else.

Chapter 4: prairie oyster

Chapter Summary

a nightmare, two mugs, and a myriad of problems.

Chapter Notes

CW: Explicit language, mentions of suicide, poisoning, self-harm.

She wakes up screaming and I pull her into my arms, holding her tight until she stops shaking.

The nascent sun trickles in between the curtains. Cold dewy air infiltrates through a crack in the window, sucking the heat out of the room. I slept longer than I have in months - four precious uninterrupted hours - but the exhaustion's still there, stubbornly burrowed deep into my bones.

“Bad dream?” I ask, trailing my fingers through her hair.

“It’s always bad when it’s about Heather.” Veronica smiles half-heartedly and extricates herself from my embrace. She slips out of bed and starts getting dressed.

“What’s the rush?”

“I’ve gotta get to Heather’s house.”

“Why?” I get up and yank on my clothes as well. “You said you were done with her.”

Veronica scoffs. “Yeah, and it was a sweet fantasy. A world without Heather. A world where everyone is free. But now it’s morning and I have to go kiss her aerobicised ass.”

I grab my coat and follow her to the window. “Let me come with.”

“Really?” she says, brows raised in surprise.

“For backup.”

Veronica blinks a few times, clearly uncertain just how effective of a backup I can be. But she accepts my offer anyway with a quick peck on the jaw. “Okay, thanks.”

She slides the window open, pauses, and turns to pat me on the chest. "By the way," she hums. "You were my first." Before I can react, she slips through the window and shimmies down the drainpipe.

It takes me a long time to boot back up. And when I do, I can't stop grinning.

You were my first.

Those four words spin around in my head like a carousel as we ride to Chandler's house. Veronica sits behind me, arms wrapped securely around my torso, and her body pressed flush against my back. It's incredibly distracting and I accidentally run a red light more than once, but we eventually get there in one piece.

Chandler's house is fuck-off big. A catalogue mansion that's every white suburbanite's wet dream. Her red convertible's nowhere in sight, but it could be locked away in the four-door garage unless she's out for Saturday Mass.

Veronica leads me into the kitchen through the backdoor with an ease and confidence that tells me she's been here many times before. I inspect the pristine marble counters and deranged family portraits as Veronica goes to the foot of the winding staircase.

"Heather?" she calls up and tilts her head, listening for a reply.

Nothing.

"Maybe she's not here," I suggest.

"Trust me. She skips the Saturday morning trip to Grandma's even when she's not hung over." Veronica rolls her eyes and cups her hands around her mouth. "*Heather!*"

"*WHAT?!*" Chandler's bellow is powerful even from one floor up.

Veronica and I exchange wry smiles.

"It's Veronica!" she yells, matching Chandler's volume. "I'm here to apologise."

"Hope you brought knee pads, bitch! Fix me a prairie oyster and I'll think about it!"

"What's in that?" Veronica furrows her brows at me. "Raw egg, vinegar..."

"...Hot sauce, Worcester, salt and pepper," I finish, idly going through all the drawers and cupboards.

"You know your hangover cures," she says, impressed.

"Sure. My dad taught me all kinds of stuff."

She opens the refrigerator and rifles through the contents with renewed purpose. "I'm thinkiiiiing...we'll cook up some soup and put it in a Coke. That'll shock the tequila right out of her system. Whaddya think? Chicken noodle or beans with bacon?"

I open the cupboard beneath the sink and grab a bottle of drain cleaner. There's a wicked sense of excitement when an idea forms. *Hey, would you look at that? It's my favourite brand.*

"Oh, I dunno. I'm a "No Rust Build-Up" man, myself," I smirk, pouring the cleaner into a glass. Sunlight hits the artificial blue and it gives an eerie sorta glow.

She deadpans. "Don't be a dick. That stuff will kill her."

"Thus ending her hangover. I say we go with Big Blue."

"What are you doing? You just can't give..." She trails off and hesitates. Changes trajectory. "Besides, she'd never drink anything that looks like that."

"So we'll use a mug," I say, grabbing one from the shelf. Big Blue goes into the ceramic mug and *voila*. Looks like an olive branch if I ever saw one. "Ceramic mug. Dim light. She won't be able to tell what she's drinking."

Veronica doesn't seem very impressed. "Forget it," she sighs, taking out a milk container and orange juice from the fridge. "Just give me a cup, jerk."

I hand Veronica another mug and she aggressively pours the milk and orange juice, which sloshes over the rim and puddles on the pristine counters.

"Now that's a prairie oyster," I praise, leaning against the counter.

She twists her mouth to the side in dissatisfaction. "Hm. Maybe we could cough a phlegm globber in it or something."

"Good idea."

We both hack up globs of phlegm and simultaneously spit. The globbers float for a second before sinking into the milky-orangey liquid.

I slide Big Blue next to her foul concoction. "Mine's prettier."

"And deadlier."

"*Chicken.*"

"You're not funny."

Something about her expression makes me laugh and I pull her into my arms. "Okay, okay, I'm sorry." I kiss her, slow and deep, and the tension runs out of her body. When we part, she's softer than putty.

"Bonehead," she says, smiling. She grabs the mug in a fluster and heads towards the stairs.

She might not be paying attention, but I sure am.

“Veronica, you-” I cut myself short.

“I what?” Veronica asks, impatiently.

What would happen if I just...let it be?

I push out a sharp breath and shake my head. “...Good luck.”

“Morning, Heather!” Veronica chirps, as we enter Heather's bedroom.

Chandler sits up in her four-poster bed, blood red silken sheets slipping from her rising form. She's in a dressing gown that shimmers with the same glossy material.

“Veronica,” Chandler smirks, reaching out for the mug. Her eyes track over to me and her expression stiffens. “And Jesse James. *Quelle surprise.*”

I glare at her over Veronica's shoulder and Chandler's blue eyes turn glacial cold. I recall what Veronica told me happened at the party, and anger flares anew. My hands curl into tight fists, hidden in the long sleeves of my coat. The joints audibly crack, one by one, like mini-gunshots.

“Let's get to it,” Chandler snaps, standing up. “*Beg.*”

Veronica moves closer to Chandler, patting the air as she tries to make peace. “Look, we both said things we didn't mean last night.”

“I actually would prefer you did this on your knees. In front of your boy-toy here.” The blonde jerks her head in my direction.

“Uh-huh,” Veronica says, flatly. “Anyhow, I'm really sorry—”

“Do I look like I'm kidding?” Chandler interjects. She jabs a finger at the floor. “*Down.*”

Veronica visibly hesitates before she sinks to her knees, cheeks flushed in humiliation.

“Nice,” the blonde says, flippantly. “But you're still dead to me.” And then, she downs her drink in one shot.

It's almost too painfully casual. Just a flick of the wrist and she's bought her passage across Styx.

Time starts to go a bit funny then. Everything seems to happen both too fast and too slow. The effect is jarring and confusing, and my chest tightens, squeezing the very air from my lungs.

Chandler scrabbles violently at her own throat, eyes bulging out of her skull as her entire face turns red then puce. She staggers and chokes and makes strange guttural sounds I didn't know

a human could make. At some point, blood dribbles out of her nose and mouth and dramatically splatters the plush white carpet at her feet.

Veronica falls back against the bedframe, eyes wide, mouth even wider.

“*Corn...nuts...!!*” is all Chandler squeezes out before she keels over and smashes through her glass coffee table. Dead as a fucking doornail.

A long shocked silence fills the room.

Chandler’s dying words ring in my ears like a tolling bell, over and over and over again.

Maybe we should make that her epitaph.

I bite back a laugh. I think I’m a little hysterical. Maybe this is all it takes to lose the last shred of sanity I’ve been clinging onto. Only took me seventeen years.

“*Quelle surprise* indeed,” I say, faintly. My body burns and freezes in disorientating succession.

Veronica snaps out of her daze and gives Chandler a shake. The body flops about lifelessly. “*Don’t just stand there! Call 911!*” She makes these odd little gasps, like hiccups, but I think she’s actually hyperventilating.

I hunch over Chandler to check her pulse. “It’s a little late for that.”

Veronica shudders; all hopes of normalcy cruelly dashed.

My brain finally kicks back into gear. First instinct is to hide the body, so I pace around the room, trying to find something. *Find something? Find what? A fucking saw??*

“Heather! Heather, wake up!”

No response.

Veronica grabs her head in both hands. “Oh my god. I just killed my best friend.”

“And your worst enemy,” I remind her.

“*Same difference*,” she snaps, shuffling away from the body. “The police...oh no, oh God...I can’t believe this is my life. The police are going to think I did this on purpose. They’re gonna have to send my SAT scores to San Quentin!”

“Unless...” I pick up a well thumbed book from Chandler’s beside table. “Look.” I flash the cover at Veronica. “She was reading *The Bell Jar*.”

She blanches. “Oh, no.”

“You got what you wanted, didn’t you?” I rap bruised knuckles against the book.

“Don’t say that! It’s one thing to want somebody out of your life. It’s another thing to serve them a cup of *liquid drainer*.”

“Veronica.” I crouch down and snatch her face with my free hand. Wide startled eyes meet my cold gaze. “We committed a murder. In Ohio, that’s a crime that’ll send us straight to the chair. But if this was a suicide...”

“A suicide...?” Veronica rubs her cheeks when I unfurl my grip.

I pointedly place the book on the glass-strewn ground, near Chandler’s limp hand.

“Adolescence is a period of life fraught with anxiety and confusion.”

We stare at each other in a silent battle of wills, but as steely as her resolve is, her instinct for self-preservation eventually wins out.

She forces out a long breath and takes a notepad and pen from Chandler's desk. “I can do Heather’s handwriting as well as my own,” she says shakily, perching herself on the edge of the bed.

“Make her sound deep.”

Veronica seems to struggle internally for a moment, before writing: ““You might think what I’ve done is shocking...””

The frilly cursive gives me a headache. ““To me though, suicide is the natural answer to the myriad of problems life has given me.””

“That’s good, but Heather would never use the word ‘myriad’.”

“This is the last thing she’ll ever write. She’ll want to cash in on as many fifty-cent words as possible.”

“She missed ‘myriad’ on a vocab test two weeks ago,” Veronica argues.

“That only proves my point more. The word is a badge for her failures at school.”

“...You’re probably right,” she sighs, and continues writing. ““People think just because you’re beautiful and popular, life is easy and fun. Nobody understood I had feelings too.””

I stare at Chandler's body. Dimly wonder when I started referring to her as 'Chandler's body', rather than 'Chandler'. I suppose she's just a thing now. ““I die knowing no-one knew the real me.””

Veronica raises her brows as she jots down my suggestion. “That’s good. Have you done this before?”

“Come on,” I say, sharply. “Finish up and plant the letter. We gotta leave before anyone finds us.”

We take the back roads to Veronica's place and don't say a single word to each other. Not even a goodbye when I drop her off at her front door.

Chapter 5: better off dead

Chapter Summary

a bottle, a revelation, and a classroom discussion.

Chapter Notes

CW: Explicit language, physical/emotional abuse, alcohol abuse, mental illness/breakdown, panic attack, self-harm, mentions of suicide.

Big Bud Dean's still pissed when I get home. He's sprawled on the couch watching TV with his hangover cure in hand. I try to slip past him unnoticed, make my footsteps real light, and most of the time it works. This time, however, he decides to use me as target practice and throws his half-empty beer bottle at my head.

It collides in an explosion of glass and beer and pain and for a split second my vision goes black. I stagger into the door and drop to my knees when they give out. Every breath comes in shocked stutters as I grab my aching skull, unsure if it's beer or blood that's dripping through my fingers.

A violent image flashes of me wringing Bud's neck until it gives a satisfying *crack*.

"I had to pay for Hudson's medical bills," Bud drawls, slurring almost incomprehensibly. He watches me calmly from his armchair, reaching into the ice box at his feet for another beer. "D'you know how much it cost to shut that whining sonuvabitch up? Twelve-fuckin'-hundred. That's twelve hundred straight outta my pocket. Now, what are you gonna do about that, *son*?"

"Oh, I don't know, *dad*," I seethe through grit teeth, trying to wipe beer out of my eyes. "Should I petition for free healthcare?"

"I'll tell you exactly what you're gonna do about it." Bud pops the cap and takes a long swig. Beer drips down his chin and soaks into his shirt. There's already a large stain there, growing by the swig. "You're gonna work onsite every mornin' and every night, until you pay for *every fuckin' cent* I wasted on your worthless hide."

I drag myself to my feet, hands balled up, white knuckled and shaking. Pure unadulterated hate surges through my veins, frothing and burning.

“You pay me shit,” I say, voice low. “If you gave me a proper, *legal* wage, I'd be long gone by now.”

Big Bud Dean burps and rocks to his feet. With every unsteady step he takes towards me, the more I tense and shrink into myself.

I hate myself when I'm like this. When there's nothing else but my asshole of a dad and his *poison*. And all I wanna do is throw my fist straight into his face, but I can't, *I can't*, because I'm paralysed by a deep-coursing terror. There's probably only one thing that scares me more than this lurching excuse of a human being - but she's not here. And the fear I feel with her, it's sweeter. *Addictive*.

The fear that Big Bud Dean inspires is sickness.

Bud grabs my collar and slams me into the door. It rattles in the frame, splintering the cheap wood. He's got a real ugly grin that splits his red face like an axe wound. I'm trembling, panting, near hyperventilating, and I can't do anything about it.

“How much did that bike of yours cost?” he drawls, face a mere inch away from mine. The noxious fumes of his breath makes my head spin.

My blood goes cold. “I'm not selling my bike.”

It took me years - *years* - of taking odd jobs wherever I could, scrounging up every dime, every dollar, until I could finally buy the only thing I'd ever wanted in my life. My motorbike means more to me than a pretty piece of machinery. It's *hope*. The singular kisby ring in my sinking ship of a life. And if he takes that away from me - *what the fuck do I have?* I'd be going down with the ship, all the way to the bottom of the ocean where the sun don't reach.

“A pathetic little pissboy like you don't need it. There's a bus, ain't there? A student like you should be taking the bus to school, not ridin' about on a flashy motorbike playing James Dean.”

“No...not my bike...” My vision blurs but I don't cry. *I don't fucking cry*. “I'll do the damn work. I'll do whatever you say. Just...don't sell my bike.”

He laughs caustically, snatching my nape and squeezing until spots enter my vision. “If you *ever* disrupt my site like that again - the bike is *gone*. You hear me, son?”

I give a jerky nod, not trusting myself to speak. He laughs again and shoves me to the ground. When he returns to his armchair, it's like I was never here.

The ensuing relief doesn't last long.

I see him sitting there, apathetically watching a football game on TV, and I know that cutting me down like that is nothing for him. It means no more than taking out the trash.

Something *snaps* in my head and I'm swept away in a flash flood of uncontrollable, unfathomable *rage*. I stalk into my room and slam the door shut, hard enough to shake loose a shower of dust, and I pace restlessly, composure cracking with every furious surge that

batters me from the inside out. I'm being eroded. I'm crumbling away. The walls are closing in and I can't breathe, I can't breathe, *I can't breathe--*

I blindly throw my fist into the wall, forcing that surge into every knuckle-cracking strike.

And then...nothing.

It's quiet. It hurts. *I can breathe.*

I stare blankly at the fresh craters in the wall, chest heaving with torrid pants.

I want Veronica. I *need* Veronica. I want to feel her under my hands. I want her heat, her lips, her depthless eyes. I want her wry smile and her awkward laughter. I want her touch, the rare kinda touch that doesn't hurt. I want to feel something, *anything*, that's not *this*.

There's no sleeping tonight - those precious four hours wasted away. My tired eyes blindly trace the clusters of shadows on the ceiling as my head fills with fevered thoughts about Veronica and Chandler and the drunk snoring away in the other room. By the time dawn chases away the last of the shadows, I come to the happy conclusion that there are just some people in this world who are better off dead. And if Chandler's death has taught me anything - it's that I can do something about it.

There's a ghastly sort of excitement in the air on Monday. The student body's humming with the news of Heather Chandler's 'suicide' and the reaction is...not quite what I was expecting.

"I'm just so thrilled to be given an example of everything I've taught you," Fleming zips around the classroom and hands out photocopies. I already know what it is before it lands on my desk. "And that example is Heather Chandler. I have photocopied her suicide note so that you can feel its tragic beauty for yourself. Let us share together the feelings the suicide has spurred in us all. Who wants to begin?"

I glance down at the paper on my desk and sure enough, there's the suicide note. Word for word in perfect imitation of Chandler's headache-inducing flowery script. My lips quirk and I seek out Veronica. She's already looking at me, eyes wide, and mouthing, *what the fuck?*

I shrug and she rolls her eyes, perhaps expecting more of a response.

"I heard it was really gnarly," someone raises. It's one of the stoners who I see ripping bongos behind the school whenever I go for a smoke. "She sucked down a bowl of multi-purpose deodorising disinfectant then she smashed--"

"Now, now," Fleming interjects, looking a little hassled. "We're not here to rehash the coroner's report. Let's talk...*emotions*." Her hands do that weird twirling thing on the emphasis.

"Are we going to be tested on this?" Coke Bottle asks in genuine concern.

I cough to cover my laugh.

Fleming glares at Coke Bottle until someone else pipes up. Paul something or rather - one of the preppies.

“Heather and I used to go together, but she said I was boring,” he says, gazing down at the note with a mournful expression. “Reading this note...I realise now I wasn’t really boring. She was just dissatisfied with her life.”

Fleming lights up like Paul something or rather’s given her an early Christmas present. “That’s very good, Peter! *Very good!*”

Another student speaks out: “Heather used to bully me. She even punched me in the face when I wore the same lipstick colour as her. I wish I realised at the time that she was just trying to *connect!* Maybe...Maybe we could have been *best friends.*”

The class ripples in revelation.

“I thought she was perfect,” one of the goth kids says. “Just another perfect asshole with a perfect life. I didn’t know that she was in so much pain this whole time. Dude, she was *so* deep.”

Murmurs of agreement fill the room.

Veronica laughs loudly, and when everyone turns to stare at her, she quickly covers her face and pretends to sob.

Careful, Sawyer.

“Sorry,” she gasps, “didn’t mean to lose control like this. It’s just...this classroom discussion has stirred up emotions I haven’t felt since Hands Across America.”

Fleming rushes to her side in dramatic concern. “Dear Veronica, Heather was your soulmate. Why don’t you share?”

Veronica quickly composes herself and wipes her eyes. “Heather was cool. And she was cruel,” she says, looking appropriately solemn. “The good looks and bad manners gave her power, but it couldn’t give her happiness. She realised the only way she could be happy was to give up her power -- and the only way she could do that was in death.”

Fleming bursts into tears and claps fervently. The rest of the class follow suit and I bury my head in my arms to hide my bubbling laughter.

At lunch, Veronica and I sit at the table in the back corner of the cafeteria. From here, we can see everyone crying and loudly mourning for the Demon Queen of Westerburg. I’m sure if the woman of the hour herself were here, she’d be wondering why she didn’t die sooner to enjoy this spectacle.

“I can’t believe it!” Veronica exclaims, staring at the photocopied note. “Heather’s more popular dead than when she was alive.”

“This is an unexpected outcome,” I admit, snatching the note from her hand and crumpling it up.

“It’s like she’s John Lennon or something.”

“Or something.”

Veronica leans in and lowers her voice. “Do you think we’re in the clear?”

I smile and kiss her forehead.

She blushes and pokes my arm in protest, “Come on, JD. I’m serious.”

“I think we’ll be okay. Heather Chandler dying is the best thing to happen to this school. Look how much closure everyone's getting.”

“I don’t know if it’s closure or an exercise in ego,” Veronica says, dryly.

“Well, now you sound just like me.”

She huffs and kisses my jaw, pausing when she sees the fresh cut on my forehead. Her brows crinkle as she grazes her fingers near it. “What happened, JD?”

“You’ve killed your whale,” I say, flinching at her touch. I take her hand and slap an apple into her palm. “Not everyone's so lucky.”

"Don't be so sure about that." Veronica sighs and tilts her head for a soft, lingering kiss. “If Ram and Kurt keep bothering you, just let me know.”

“Oh? Are you gonna protect me from the big mean jocks?”

"If I don't, there won't be any jocks left at Westerburg. Then what'll happen when it's football season?" She viciously bites into the apple and heads to her usual table. There sits the Traffic Light Trio, sans red.

Chapter 6: lots of oregano

Chapter Summary

several interviews, a bad joke, and an awkward first meeting

Chapter Notes

CW: Explicit language, physical/mental abuse, violence, mentions of mental illness, ableist language.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The Theatre of Grief continues for the rest of the day in due fashion. And I, in my appropriate fashion, spend that time skirting Ram and Kurt, and catching up with Veronica when and where I can. We share a few classes, but our frees are at different times, so she's always hanging out with the Heathers while I'm in American History. And while she's in Calculus, I'm outside behind the school, smoking and reading or chatting idly with the stoners. They make for pretty good conversation - most of it nonsensical, but at least a stoner's nonsense is easy on the stomach.

They offer me a smoke every now and then, but I keep away from the stuff. Mom's brother got himself locked up in an asylum because he didn't stay away. Morning joints and party bongs sent my uncle over the edge when he was in his early twenties - *schizophrenia* they call it.

This kinda madness runs in the family. Mom probably had it. And me? I feel it ticking away in my brain and the timer's counting down to zero.

After school, I go to the site to work for a few hours to help clear the rubble. Most of the guys are sore at me - Hudson especially - so I work in my own zone, mulling over Veronica and the state of our relationship.

I'm not very adept at relationships in any form, much less a romantic one. My only experience with girls is limited to drunken kisses and clumsy groping, but nothing really substantial. It's not their fault - I just don't do humans very well. Whoever said that we were social creatures was a suntouched asshole.

And I was content in my independence. I was verging on this side of asexual and always thought I'd die alone gagging on my vomit in a seedy bar somewhere. There was a freedom in that - knowing that I never had to answer to anyone or be something to someone. But then,

I met Veronica, and now I can't imagine my life before her. When I try to cast my mind back to last week, pre-Veronica era, there's only a pitch black nothing.

What do you do in a relationship? Sure there's the sex and the accidental homicide - but I've seen the movies. We're supposed to date and have stupid misunderstandings and grand traffic-disrupting gestures, right? Maybe we get jealous. Maybe we get separated. And once we graduate, maybe we get married and have the golden lab and two point five kids and Sunday BBQs and whatever the fuck people do.

It's surprising when I realise that yeah, I *really* want that life. That boring, mundane, comfortable life. At least with Veronica. And I almost can't recognise myself.

I work hard. Sweat out all the things that pissed me off today. By the time I've cleared my zone, my arms are numb and my hands are blistered raw, even with the gloves. Big Bud Dean even gives me a begrudging nod of approval when he sees my zone and lets me leave early. He heads off as well, claiming that he's got a meeting with some 'friends' regarding a big job. He'll probably be back home past midnight, drunk and revving up for another 'kaboom'.

Veronica's sitting on my doorstep when I head home. She's reading a book and sipping on a Slurpee - another one's sitting beside her, presumably for me. That crooked grin makes an appearance as I pull into the driveway and she bookmarks her place before closing her book.

"Thought you might be fiending," she says, proffering the second Slurpee. "Although, I've been sitting here for a while so won't be as potent, sorry."

Sure enough, it's just warm liquid sugar. I take a sip anyway, just to show my appreciation. "Lime. You remembered."

"You don't give me much to remember," she says, a tad dryly.

"You only gotta ask."

I unlock the front door and Veronica steps inside cautiously, like she knows she's gotta watch her feet for glass. She sees the battered walls and broken furniture. The only untouched thing is Bud's 50-inch Hitachi television that he treats like a second child.

We move so often that Bud never bothered to invest in a proper house. The nice ones only rent out for long-term anyway, so it's either sketchy motels or short-term leases -- and sometimes, I'd rather brave the wilds of a Holiday Inn. It's all a technicality anyway. This is a house, not a home. A place to sleep, shower, and eat. A pit-stop, rather than a destination.

I could be embarrassed. Maybe I should be. But Veronica is above all that petty materialistic judgement. I know she sees beyond the puke-green carpet and peeling beige wallpaper.

"Nice place," she hums, plopping herself down onto the couch. "Nice TV." That one sounds more genuine.

"It's my dad's favourite child." I join her on the couch and throw an arm haphazardly behind her shoulders. She automatically sinks into my side and my heart tremors.

“Were you working?” she asks, noticing my dirt-streaked shirt and blisters.

“Sorry--I can shower--”

“No need. I like this look on you.” Veronica huffs a laugh and kisses the corner of my mouth. “The rugged man of the earth vibe's doing it for me.”

I huff a laugh and kiss back, tasting cherry on her lips.

When we finally come up for air, Veronica grabs the remote and turns the TV on. There's a report from the local news station about Chandler's 'suicide' and they're interviewing random students outside the school - Chandler's ostensible friends.

“Do you want me to ask? About you, I mean,” Veronica suddenly says, pinching her Slurpee straw between finger and thumb. She glances up at me, brown eyes turned golden in the hazy afternoon light.

“I'd rather talk about you,” I say, honestly. “Anyway, there's not much to tell.”

“Why not?” She leans in close and I fight the urge to retreat. “I'm sure there's an entire well of deep, dark secrets behind that pretty face of yours.”

“...Well. For starters, I was an accomplice in a murder.”

Veronica narrows her eyes. “That's not funny, JD. Look, it's all over the news. We shouldn't make light of it like that.”

“Sorry.” *I'm not.*

Heather Duke, in all her 50-inch Hitachi glory, poses by a tree in front of the school, dabbing at her eyes while she talks about Chandler.

I switch channels, and there Duke is again on another news programme. This time, she's posing by a fountain, dramatically weeping into a handkerchief.

Click. Another channel. Another programme. Duke again, in the library now with a very heavy, leather-bound book held in her arms.

“Turn it off!” Veronica groans, burying her head into my shoulder.

I do so and toss the remote onto the stained tea table. The relief the silence brings is palpable. Even on a television screen, Heather Duke is an eyesore.

Veronica sighs and picks at the tiny holes worn into my shirt. “I'm tired of watching this crap. They make suicide look cool. Like dying's the only way you can get respect you never did in life. It's gross.” She goes quiet then, staring blankly into the void. And then, in a small voice, she says, “Do you think Heather's mom will keep everything in her room the same? Like she's alive?”

I huff a laugh and say, "If she does, that rug's gonna need a good clean." Her glare is rending and I recall too late her rule about not making jokes. "Why would she do that? It's psychotic."

"I guess it's what I would do, if I was her. I feel bad, JD," she says, wrapping her arms around my torso. Her cheek presses against my chest, where my heart's beating a mile a minute. "Heather was a human being and we killed her. You feel bad too, right?"

I glance down at Veronica. Her long lashes quiver in her upset, above gently flushed cheeks. *Goddamn, she's so beautiful.* "Well, yeah," I lie. "Of course I feel bad."

The sound of a familiar engine rumbles down the street outside. *Big Bud Dean.* Why the fuck is he here *now*? He *never* comes home this early.

I rip myself away from Veronica and lurch to my feet, panic building with every sharp breath. "We should go. Why don't we hit the Dairy Queen?"

Veronica wrinkles her brows in confusion. She stands up slowly, much too slowly. "What's wrong?"

"*Jason!*" His voice makes my stomach flip.

"W-We gotta leave now," I stammer, inching towards the door. I don't know what he'll do if he sees Veronica. Nevermind what he'll do to me - if the old man's drunk, she's not safe here at all.

Veronica rises to her feet, alarmed at my sudden shift in demeanour. "JD, what's going on?"

"*Jason, are you here?*"

"I-It's my dad." I hate the way my voice shakes.

Her face lights up and she quickly fixes her crumpled blazer. "Oh, cool! I wanna meet him—"

"No, *no*, it's really not a good idea—"

"*Jason!*" The front door slams open and in strides Big Bud Dean, chest puffed, face red, and the stench of beer wafting from his person. Judging by the way he's able to stand upright, he's not entirely inebriated. But he's not entirely sober either.

My heart sinks to the pit of my stomach. I instinctively take a few steps back and hunch my shoulders, hands clenched tightly at my sides as though I'm preparing myself for a fight. Might have to, if things go the way I expect.

"Jason! It's showtime!" He strides into the lounge and pauses when he sees Veronica. His face turns real ugly then, like he's seen dog shit on the bottom of his shoe. "...You have *company*." His tone's low. Dangerous.

I swallow hard and gesture weakly. "Veronica. This is my dad, Big Bud Dean."

Veronica walks up to him, hand outstretched for a shake, but he waves her off dismissively. Her sunny smile drops then, and I'm suddenly inordinately angry.

"Get rid of her," Bud scoffs, not even bothering to glance her way. Instead, he swaggers right up to me and jabs a finger in my face. "Some friends of ours need a hotel brought down. Run over to Sears and pick up eighty pounds of fertiliser and some diesel fuel." He pulls out one of the many fake IDs he's acquired through his sketchy contacts and holds it out. "Use the Nevada ID."

She's looking at me with knitted brows, concern etched deep into her perfect face. My anger sharpens. Takes on a bold hue.

"I'm going out for ice-cream with my girlfriend," I growl, and this time it's *me* getting all up in his face, which contorts in all kinds of ways that made me wish I had a camera.

Bud's glare gains a dangerous glint. He turns to see said girlfriend stifling a smile. Something in her expression seems to really strike where it's soft, because what comes out of his mouth next is pure vitriol.

"You know how I blow up one of these shitbox suburban houses?" he says, obnoxiously loud.

Veronica blinks at him, not comprehending his question.

Bud gives her a menacing grin with too many teeth. "I pack the top floor with thermals and then set it all off with a Norwegian in the boiler room." His beady eyes narrow. "Where's *your* house, sweetheart?"

Her smile comes strained, clearly unsure whether he's taking the piss or not. Nervous laughter flutters from her mouth as she shifts her weight between her feet. "I need to go," she says with awkward politeness. "My mom's expecting me for dinner." There's a long pause when neither Bud nor I answer. What else is there to say, but *get out while you can*?

Veronica's smile strains moreso, stretching so wide she almost looks deranged. "Spaghetti," she explains, pointlessly. "Lots of oregano..." Her voice peters out and she visibly squirms.

I do her a favour and cut the silence. Try to get Bud's attention on me instead. "Sounds nice," I seethe through grit teeth. "Last time I saw *my* mom, she was waving out the window in a library in Texas, *right dad*?"

Bud freezes.

As a general rule, we don't speak about what happened to mom. We haven't even talked about her since we buried her remains - whatever could be salvaged, at least - back in Texas. To Bud, she's a bad dream that never should've happened, so to be reminded of her like this out of the blue? Yeah. I figure I'm mincemeat.

He closes the gap between us until he's looming over me, and I have to lift my head to meet his frigid glare. There's death in his eyes.

Strangely, I don't feel as scared as I should. Maybe it's because Veronica's only a few feet away.

"That's right, son," he finally responds, shoulders tensing and rolling. *"Texas."*

The air gets heavy. Suffocating. The tension's so thick you could slice it with a knife and serve it up on a plate. In my periphery, Veronica fidgets anxiously. I can practically hear her thoughts. But there's nothing she can do for me, except make things worse.

Veronica must have come to the same conclusion, because she quickly makes a beeline for the front door. "I'll see you tomorrow, JD. Call me." She adds the last like an afterthought, but I understand what she's implying.

I don't have enough time to make my escape. As soon as the door slams shut, my fate is sealed.

It goes like how it always goes, but this time it's worse. Not the beating - I can take beatings just fine. No, this time, Bud's got another thing to hold over me. Another weakness to take advantage of. *Veronica.*

Even if I cower and bow my head in obeisance, he utters one insulting thing about Veronica and I see red. I even get a few blows in myself, but he's got weight, height, and unequivocal rage over me, and it's not long before I'm on the ground, reduced to a trembling pillbug, hugging my knees to my chest and trying not to cry.

He leaves after that. Goes to Sears himself because I'm useless to him in this state. Says so himself. And all I can do is drag myself to my room and mop up the blood best I can and try to light a cigarette without setting my bed on fire.

Half a bottle of whiskey later and I'm out like a light. Good thing about a beatdown is that I never have the mind to think about anything other than the pain. My brain shuts down long enough to give me much needed rest. It's a blessing in disguise, really.

What can I say? I'm an optimist.

Chapter End Notes

In my HC, JD is asexual/aromantic. If he lived at the end of this story, I'd imagine he would be ace/aro unless he found someone else to be obsessed with - which I don't doubt he would have. Even so, I don't think his obsession with Veronica is at all romantic like he'd like to believe it is. I think his obsession comes out of desperation and hurt - she's someone to fill the emptiness in his life and, like Veronica says, she's also a convenient excuse to wield as a weapon.

Chapter 7: sacrificial lamb

Chapter Summary

a short-sighted decision, a stolen bottle of pills, and a proposal (not that kind)

Chapter Notes

CW: Explicit language, mentions of r*pe & sexual assault, misogynistic slurs, ableist language, victim-blaming, violence, mentions of self-harm, mentions of inebriation/alcohol abuse, mentions of s*icide, mentions of child abuse.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The rumours spread like a wildfire. *Veronica Sawyer is a slut. Veronica Sawyer blew Ram and Kurt. Veronica Sawyer had a threeway on Heather's grave. Veronica Sawyer—*

I don't know what goes on behind the scenes with the Heathers. I'm sure it's a wealth of parties, underage drinking, and clumsy fucking, just like any other school. And sure, this is a pretty vanilla rumour as rumours go - just another girl branded with a scarlet letter - and normally I would never pay attention. But this is *Veronica Sawyer*.

She's not in homeroom this morning, so I sit beside Coke Bottle - Bob, I think it was. Or maybe it was Brian?

When I give him a short nod in greeting, Brian nervously adjusts his thick glasses and places his biology homework on my desk.

I give it a cursory glance and hand it back. "Does it look like I need to copy your homework?"

Brian blinks at me. "Yes...?"

"You shouldn't be so forthcoming with it, you know."

"Thank you for your unsolicited advice," he says with a sniff.

I stifle a smirk. He can be kinda funny, this kid. "Have you seen Veronica?"

Brian shakes his head. "Is this about what happened last night?"

"What do you think happened last night?"

“Doesn’t matter what I think. Only truth that matters is what *they* dictate.”

“‘They’?”

“Jocks. Heathers. Anyone who’s anyone at Westerburg.” Brian puts his homework away and leans close. He whispers conspiratorially, “*Do you have a thing for Veronica?*”

I just give him a half-smile in response.

Brian gives me a pitying look. “Give it up, man. Girls like Veronica only go for guys who wear lettermans.”

“You don’t know anything about her.”

He shrinks when he sees my narrowed expression; holds out his hands in surrender. “I’m just calling it like I see it.”

My mood stays in the gutter all morning and I hardly pay attention in class until the midday bell rings. I know it’s not true, what’s being said about her - but it makes me nervous all the same. Veronica might not have had a threeway on Heather’s grave, but something definitely happened last night. Something bad enough for her to miss half a day of school.

I stalk into the cafeteria, narrowly scanning the crowd. There she is, sitting at her usual table with the Heathers, only this time the jocks are crowded around and making lewd gestures. She’s shrunk into herself while everyone leers and jeers. Heathers included.

An anger like no other floods my every sense as I shove my way to the table. I’m *mad*, so mad my hands have gone numb and I’ve lost control of my steering completely. Instinct guides my actions. There’s no thought save for static.

I’m already running when I decide to bullrush one of the jocks - a hateful blur of red and white. But I’m still tenderised meat wobbling about on two legs, and yes, I’m *definitely* not sober - the empty bottle of whiskey beside my bed can attest to that.

I’ve leapt into torrid rapids, forgetting that I can barely swim.

They strike me where it hurts - which is everywhere. Fresh bruises upon old bruises. Old cuts split anew. I don’t bother protecting myself because I’m too pissed to feel anything. I don’t make it easy for them, struggling, kicking, punching, biting wherever and whenever I can. There’s the taste of blood, but I don’t know if it’s mine or theirs. I hope it’s theirs.

Like torrential rain, it’s over as soon as it’s begun, and I’m lying dazed on the cafeteria floor, feeling like I’ve just gone fifty rounds in a human-sized rock tumbler. There’s a whistle and commotion nearby (*Coach Whatshisname*) and the colonnade of feet caging me in scatter and clear. I raise myself onto an elbow and wipe at my nose. The back of my hand comes away bloody.

“JD?” Veronica drops down to her knees beside me, red rimmed eyes wide and glistening. She reaches out for my arm and I instinctively flinch from her touch. Hesitation mars her expression. Her offending hand wavers, then drops. “Are you okay?”

I almost answer in the positive, when I sit up and black out for a second. “Uh...sort of.” It even hurts to talk. “You?”

She gives me a strained smile that makes her more pitiable than if she’d just let herself cry. “Come on. I’ll help you to the nurse’s office.”

Veronica pulls me to my feet and we leave the cafeteria, ignoring the stares boring into us. Coach Whatshisname is lecturing Ram and Kurt, barking about ‘not fucking up before the first game of the season’. At least he’s too busy to notice us making our great escape, which means I won’t get pinned for this fight.

The infirmary is empty, so Veronica sits me down on a bed and bustles about, pilfering a little more than needed. At one point I spy her slipping a bottle of pills into her pocket.

“Take off your coat,” she orders, spreading her loot on the mattress beside me.

“Yes, ma’am.” I wince when my smile tugs at the cut on my lip. “Do this often, do you?”

“What? Play nurse for short-sighted morons?”

“Short sighted?” I slip the coat off and hang it over the bed rails. Already, I feel exposed.

“Veronica, they were insulting you-”

“I know,” she says, curtly.

I blink at her, confused. “Then why-”

“Why did I just sit there and take it?” She soaks a cotton ball in disinfectant and dabs at my cut lip - perhaps a little too hard. “Is that how you see me, JD? As someone who’s too helpless to defend herself?”

“I didn’t...no. Not at all.”

“That’s not how I see it.” Veronica raises her eyes to mine. Locks them in the deep well of her gaze. There’s fire there. And a dangerous fragility that reminds me of broken glass.

A gaze like that forces honest introspection. I can’t half-ass my way out of this one.

“I got mad,” I say, hoarsely. “I got mad because of what they’re saying about you. And... yeah, it was about you. But it also wasn’t.” I pause when she moves onto the deeper cut on my right cheekbone. It stings bad, but I relish it because it’s a good kinda hurt. “I don’t like bullies. Sometimes they set me off and I can’t control myself.” I touch her arm and our eyes lock again. “I’m sorry.”

“Raise your shirt,” she says, stiffly.

I dither for a moment, before carefully raising the hem of my shirt and exposing a colourful Rorschach beaten into my flesh.

Veronica intakes sharply through her nose. Her hard exterior softens and she gently tugs up my shirt higher, exposing more of my torso. Long seconds, minutes, tick by as she inspects me. I can't suppress the tremor in my hands. Those roving brown eyes scour deep into me like a razor sharp knife, leaving behind raw wounds that will probably never heal.

I don't ever want them to heal.

Eventually, she tugs down my shirt and releases a long breath. She cups the side of my face. Brushes her thumb over a bruise. "I don't need you to do this for me." She kisses the corner of my mouth. "You hide yourself under layers of bruises like it's going to protect you. You know how stupid that is, right?"

My heart skips a beat. "I know." I don't. "Are you still mad at me?"

Veronica sighs again and slaps a bandaid on my cheek. "Yes. No." She drops down beside me, head hanging low. Her hand closes around the cotton swabs and her knuckles turn white. "I'm mad at myself."

"Why? You didn't do anything wrong."

"How do you know?" She glares at me through her curls and I can see the glistening tears on her waterlines. "You weren't there."

"It doesn't matter what they say you did."

"Do you think I'm a whore, JD?"

"I think you're perfect, Veronica. Whatever you do in your spare time, that's your prerogative. All I know is that you're better than them. All of them. You're *special*." I grasp her face and kiss her damp cheeks dry. A flicker of a smile warms her visage.

"I should have been smarter," she mutters, leaning into my touch. "I should have known it was a trick. Heather Mac told me it was an emergency so I didn't really think about it. I kept thinking about Heather Chandler and I assumed the worst, so I just..." She shakes her head in frustration. "Anyway, I rushed over to the cemetery and Kurt and Ram were there. Heather told me that if she got me there, then Kurt would leave her alone. So..."

"So you were the sacrificial lamb," I say, dryly.

"Something like that." Veronica takes me by the wrist and inspects my hands. The old bruising and tiny scars flecked across the skin. She runs her fingers over my knuckles. "They were drunk. Real drunk. I suppose that's how I was able to get away in the end."

Ice runs down my spine. Freezes my countenance. "They raped you."

"Tried to," she monotones.

Veronica must've seen something in my expression because she quickly holds my hand, locking our fingers together as though to tether me down. "JD, *don't*. Please. I don't want to make this worse than it already is."

“How could it be worse?”

“I don’t need you to be my white knight.” she snaps.

“If anyone’s the white knight, it’s you.”

It’s a bit of a character flaw of hers. The softness that makes her so pliable; moulds her into the ‘yes woman’ that the Heathers love to sink their claws into. She undoubtedly has strength - the kind that’s blinding and all-encompassing. The kind that draws other people to her like moths to a Veronica shaped flame. But that damned softness also stifles her potential. If she only had the resolve to sit elsewhere at lunch. If only she had ripped up that forged note from Ram to Martha. If only she had defied Chandler instead of grovelling on her knees. *If only...*

“What do you want from me?” she asks, wiping at her eyes frustratedly. “There’s nothing I can do about Ram and Kurt. Even if I went to the principal about it, he’s not going to punish his star quarterback and linebacker.”

I glance at my hands. My ruined knuckles. “Take revenge.”

“*What?*” She stares at my serious expression for a long moment before erupting into giggles. “Okay, Edmond Dantès. How exactly am I supposed to *take revenge*?” She utters the last with theatrical emphasis, clearly not taking me seriously.

I don’t blame her. The idea is crazy. Laughable. But I know, *I know*, this is what needs to happen. This is what the last seventeen years of my life has been leading to. Why I’ve suffered year after year of beatdowns and vitriol. Why my mother walked into that library in Texas and waved me goodbye. It wasn’t for nothing. Those loose, painful strands of my life are finally coming together to this one, comprehensible point. And Veronica is the firestarter.

I rise to my feet and pace the room, too restless to sit still. “First thing’s first,” I say, brain ticking a mile a second. “You’re going to call Kurt. Tell him that you want to meet him and Ram in the cemetery Friday night.”

Friday night is busy. Everyone’s too drunk or relaxed to care and the cops will be dealing with bar brawls all night. It’s perfect.

Veronica’s smile fades. “Why would I do that?”

“You’re going to tell him that you want to finish what they started. A romantic threeway on Heather Chandler’s grave.”

“That isn’t going to happen.”

“No,” I pace over to her and lean my hands on the mattress, either side of her waist. Our faces are but an inch apart. Her gaze darkens, like rolling storm clouds preluding a roaring tempest.

Our lips graze when I slip my hand into her pocket and pull out the pilfered bottle of pills. Sedatives.

The rest of my plan takes form in my head. It'll be tricky, but if I manage to gather all of the components then it might just work. Above all, Veronica will have to trust me.

"I have a few things I need to get," I murmur. "Come to my room tonight and I'll fill you in on the rest."

"Only if you promise it's nothing bad." I know what she's implying. She means, no Big Blue.

"It's a harmless prank. A taste of justice for their transgressions. Someone around here has to punish them, especially seeing how the school's so reluctant to, given their status as football MBPs."

"MVPs," Veronica corrects me with a half-smile.

"Whatever. Look. Do you want in or not? I guarantee a good time at their expense."

She twists her lips to the side, uncertain. I give her my best toothy grin and as expected, her will cracks and falters.

"Alright, fine," she acquiesces. "But if I don't have a good time, you owe me a Slurpee."

"Deal." I grab her hand and slap the pill bottle into her palm. "Didn't take you for a pill girl."

Veronica rolls her eyes. "It's not for fun. I've been having trouble sleeping."

"Nightmares?"

"Mm."

"Family doctor not working out for you?"

"I don't want my parents to know."

Her moral quandary over killing Chandler is clearly taking a toll on her. Something that I can't for the life of me understand. There's that softness again. Irrational. Illogical. The only thing that keeps Veronica from reaching her true potential.

Once she sees the good that comes out of our little revenge on Friday night, she's sure to come around and quash that softness herself. She'll see reason - I'm certain of it.

The thrum of anticipation courses through my veins, jump-starting my heart. I lean down and kiss her deeply and we melt into each other for a time. When we part, most of her perplexion seems to have dissipated, replaced by a happy, giddy expression.

"After Friday night, you'll sleep like a baby," I promise her. And by the way her smile widens, she believes me.

Sociopath JD is really making an appearance in this chapter. I hope I'm making it clear that JD's not doing this because of Veronica. He's always come across as self-centered to me, so it makes sense that he'd be making Veronica's assault about his vendetta against his father/his own pain.

It's really strange writing a from a character's POV when they manipulate and project and generally act like a superior asshole. I really want to make it clear that we should understand JD's origins and the factors influencing his decisions/actions but never use them as a justification for his behaviour. And sure, we can sympathise with him as an abused person suffering from mental health issues, but we should never sympathise with him as an abuser and killer.

Saying that, I love trashbois with an unhealthy passion and JD is one of the trashiest c:

Chapter 8: ich luge

Chapter Summary

an apology, two pistols, and a plan

Chapter Notes

CW: Explicit language, ableist language, misogynistic language, non-explicit sexual content

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Big Bud Dean gives me the afternoon off. I suppose seeing me stagger and fumble about made him apprehensive about my quality of work, so he exiled me with a *“Get your useless punk ass off my site before you fuck up my equipment!”*

When I head to the portable to drop off my gear, I almost run into Hudson who’s ducking through the door. He looks better but he still won’t look me in the eyes. I think I royally fucked up the only semi-friendship I had on this crew. No more idle conversations about shitty metal and sharing a whiskey bottle on the curbside after everyone’s headed to the bar. There’s a pang of regret as I watch him go, his shoulders raised and tense like he can feel my stare on his back.

I grimace and stalk into the portable, shucking my hi-vis and hard hat into the spare locker. No more Hudson. All because I couldn’t keep my damn temper in check.

I leave him a fresh pack of his favourite smokes in his locker anyway. Hope he gets my message.

When I get home, I’m tired. The kind of tired that makes my bones ache and my head fuzzy and I almost pass out drinking a glass of water. I don’t make it to bed. I just let myself fall into the couch, dimly aware that I’ll be stiff as a board when I wake up.

I have restless dreams. Patchwork snatches of memories and fiction that make no sense sewn together. Words, voices, faces, feelings, I only process what little I can fathom. But at the core of it all is a girl with wild curly hair and dark depthless eyes and a roguish, crooked grin. Everything else is white noise.

I wake with a jerk. Sweat drenched into my shirt. It’s twilight. The dark hazy blue of the rising moon shifts reality into a lingering dream. It takes me a moment to realise my borders -

where I start and end - and it's only then when I notice the cold of the night.

Veronica probably won't be sneaking in through my window until past midnight, so I have some time to get everything I need.

There's a box that Bud lugs around with us no matter where we go. A box of ancient stuff from his old man. I've rifled through it before and never thought much on it - most of it is useless junk and sentimental crap that means nothing to me. Except the lockbox.

I rock to my feet, stretching out my stiff joints with satisfying cracks. A quick glance at the clock above the television tells me it's just past eight.

Before I head down to the basement ('the den', Bud likes to call it), I grab a can of chilli to eat cold, wolfing it down in a few bites to calm the sharp edge of hunger. It's a disgusting texture - congealed and chunky - but at least I don't taste anything. I haven't really tasted anything for years. Lime Slurpee and other neon sugar-loaded crap are my only salvation in that regard.

Mom would be appalled, I think, chucking the empty can into the overflowing bin. She used to cook the best meals, recipes that her grandma passed down to her before she carked it. Now they've all died along with her and I can hardly remember what her food even tasted like. No doubt, they were good. Better than good.

The box is placed snugly under the stairs in the den. Bud treats it well, so even though it's suffered through decades and countless trips in the back of a truck, the box is only just starting to wear. I turn on the light and sit cross-legged on the ground as I parse through the contents. There's not much of interest except for a well-worn album full of black and white photos.

Inside, I see snapshots of men I don't recognise but bear a familiar resemblance to. Colourless eyes that appear black in shadows and white in the light - always piercing, always fierce. There's a coldness to the expressions that endured in the following generations: there's the angry tension in Bud's jaw; the hard knuckles that's wielded like weapons; the jagged edge to Bud's smirk.

I flip through the album backwards, watching these men get younger and younger. Here, I find ill-fitted masks of normalcy; the hesitant distance, and tender confusion. They are half-baked, green legged. Not-just-yets in a world that's all-too-much.

There's a portrait of a kid in a military uniform, waving at the camera with a duffel bag slung over a shoulder. The guy's real young - looks like my age, seventeen - and for a moment, it steals my breath away. It's like looking at my reflection through layers of time.

He looks so innocent. Carefree. Like he's off to a school camp and not the frontlines of battle where he'll shoot at other kids as young and stupid as himself. Did he know? Or was he just pretending? Dwelling in the lurid safety of false machismo, when in reality he's just shitting himself?

"He was around twenty in that photo. Already married and off to war."

I start badly, almost upending the box; my heart near bursting from my chest.

Bud's sitting halfway down the stairs, beer bottle in hand, peering down at the album spread open on the ground. My first instinct is to scan the den for a weapon or an escape - but my panicked brain finally catches up to reality and I realise that he's *smiling*.

And not a mean, you're-going-to-get-it smile. But a relaxed, genuine smile. I know it's not directed at me but I'll take my wins where I can.

Cautiously, I angle the album so that he can better see the photos. He gives a grunt of appreciation.

"Carl Dean Junior, my old man," he says, taking a swig of beer. "Just before he was shipped off to fight the Nazis in Berlin. Not much older than you and he was already earnin' himself medals on the frontline."

I ignore the jab and flip over to one of the previous pages. I point to the other guy featured in this album. "Who's this?"

"Uncle Sammy Dean," Bud grunts. "He got himself blown up one week into service. My old man never recovered from that. 'Sammy was supposed to be the war hero', he said, 'but my ma and pa got me instead.'" He gives a bitter laugh. "The old man would get into a real bad mood if we ever brought up Uncle Sammy. Bad enough to beat us black and blue just for breathin'. So we learnt quick that Sammy was a bad word. It was only safe to talk about his brother when he was drinkin' and feelin' generous, which was hardly ever. Uncle Sammy was always reading his books, like you. My old man? He liked to get his hands dirty."

Bud swirls the beer around, expression turned begrudging. "You got them weak genes in you, son. If I were a bettin' man, I'd say you was headed to an early grave, just like your great Uncle Sammy."

"Thanks, dad," I say, dryly. "Your confidence in me is overwhelming."

"I'm jus' sayin'," Bud growls, giving me the stink-eye. "Keep your damn head down, do the work, and you might live long enough to earn your medals. Dean men go sour, and you're already curlin' at the edges."

"Don't worry. I won't ever become like you." I slam the album close and return it to the box.

Bud chuckles, though not from good humour. "If you could ever earn a fraction of my success, you'd be doin' pretty damn well for yourself."

"It sure is enticing, but I think I'll be okay."

"I know you think you're better than me. I see you, readin' all that poetry and literature and lookin' down at the honest work I do. But you won't last long on that high horse, son. Not when you're really just a cowardly little shit who's still clingin' onto his momma's britches." Bud smirks and rises to his feet, swaying a tad. "The dead men who write your books ain't worth a fraction of the dead man who earned those medals."

“Are you saying I should go to war?” I deadpan.

Bud bares his teeth in a mirthless grin. “A candy-ass pussy like you could never kill anyone. Maybe replace those books with a hammer and you’ll be gettin’ somewhere.”

He drains his beer and stomps up the stairs. His footsteps disappear in the direction of the kitchen, most likely for another drink. Judging by his good mood, it seems like he’s got another contract - one big enough to keep his fists at bay.

I glance down at the box and spot the corner of the lockbox. My heart skips a beat and I yank it out.

There they are.

Two pistols, pristine despite their age. Carl Dean Junior and Sammy Dean’s M1911 service pistols. They’re a pretty standard fare that use .45 ACP ammo. Nothing that I can’t pick up from the local 24-hour gun store. No need for a fake ID. As long as you have cash, they keep outta your business.

My palms go clammy from sheer excitement as I pull one of the pistols free. It fits snugly in my hand - a perfect fit, like it was made just for me. I can’t control the manic grin that stretches across my face and I leap to my feet, aiming at an invisible foe.

I cock the gun and pull the trigger.

BANG!

The body falls to the ground, a perfect hole between the eyes. I lower the pistol, thrumming. It feels *good*. Real fucking good. Like all the hateful parts of me are suddenly gone, eradicated by that single imaginary shot. In this perfect, fleeting moment, standing here with a dead man’s gun in my hand, I am immortal. Nevermind the high horse - I’m riding the *goddamn clouds*.

I slip both pistols into my coat pocket and close the lockbox, shoving it to the bottom of the box where Bud won’t ever see it. Out of sight, out of mind.

“Are those...are they *real*?”

I chuckle at Veronica’s wide-eyed expression and hand her one of the pistols. “As real as you and me, darling.”

She tentatively takes the weapon. Holds it like it’s about to blow up in her hand. “Where did you get these, JD?”

“Found them in a box full of my grandpa’s stuff. They belonged to him and his brother. Standard service pistols. We’ll be filling them with *Ich Luge* bullets.”

She blinks at me. “*Ich Luge*...?”

I pull out a small brandless box of ammo and give it a demonstrative shake. "My grandpa scored them in World War II. They're like tranquilisers, only they break the surface of the skin, enough to cause blood but not any real harm."

"So it looks like the peron's been shot and killed," Veronica says, slowly, "when they're really just unconscious and bleeding."

I pull her into my arms from behind, curling my hands around hers. I guide her pistol up, aiming head-level. She intakes softly and tightens her grip. "I suggest we give Ram and Kurt a little scare. Make them ever regret touching you. And once we're done, we'll knock 'em out long enough to make it look like a suicide pact. Complete with a forged suicide note."

Veronica tilts her head to give me a side-glance. There's a slight hook in the corner of her mouth, indicating her amusement. "'Ram and I died the day we realised we could never reveal our forbidden love to an uncaring and disapproving world. The joy we shared in each other's arms was greater than any touchdown. Yet we were forced to live the life of Sexist-Beer-Guzzling-Jock-Asshole.' Something like that?"

"'Misapproving'," I suggest, grinning. "We don't want to make them out to be too secretly eloquent."

"Hm. Good point. Why would the Germans invent a bullet that doesn't kill people?"

"They used them to fake their own suicides," I lie, smoothly. "The tranq should last twelve hours. By morning, they'll be found and made a laughing stock of the town."

"It seems apropos," Veronica says, turning around and flinging her arms around my neck. The barrel of the pistol digs into my shoulder blade. "Guys insecure about their sexuality are the most vocally homophobic."

"Even if we didn't forge a note, their tragic romance will practically write itself."

"Just another case of star-crossed lovers, doomed to die by their own hands."

"We did just cover *Romeo and Juliet* in English Lit."

"Funny isn't it? How everything just seems to align for us?"

I laugh, "Even the universe wants this--"

Our lips collide before I finish my sentence. My head spins, from the heat, the lack of oxygen, the intense fluttering of my heart, maybe all three at once.

Veronica rips herself away from the kiss long enough to shove me onto the bed and straddle my waist. She digs the muzzle of the pistol into my neck, just under my jaw, forcing my head to the side. When I swallow, she digs the muzzle in harder, making it impossible to move.

Fire blazes in her dark eyes. I'm helpless to her will.

“I like it when you look at me like that,” she hums, tracing her free hand down the side of my face. Her cold fingers slither down to my jawline, the exposed curve of my throat, and down to my collarbone. “Teach me how to load this thing.”

I lick my lips nervously. “We should save them for Ram and Kurt-”

The gun jabs into my Adam’s apple, cutting my sentence short. She looms over me like a brilliant, violent storm. “You’ll be fine. They’re just tranquilisers aren’t they? *Ich Luge* bullets? So teach me. How do I load them into the gun?”

Dark desire stirs within, rears its foul and distorted head. My pulse throbs against the cold pistol barrel. As though under hypnosis, I obediently instruct her on loading the ‘*Ich Luge*’ bullets into the chamber. She’s a quick study and loads the gun deftly.

Without my guidance, she finds the safety and flicks it off. All she has to do to blow a hole through my head is cock the gun and squeeze the trigger.

My face goes numb when she returns the muzzle to my throat. Just two small motions. That’s less than a second. Less than a second away from oblivion.

Cold sweat sends shivers through my body and I’m at once burning and freezing to the core. Veronica leans down to brush her lips against mine, a curtain of curls casting our faces in shadow.

“You’re shaking,” she breathes, bringing her fingers to the pulse in my neck. The muzzle travels to my temple and jabs hard enough to draw spots into my vision. “Your heart’s beating so fast. Are you scared?”

“Not scared.” I am. “Just cold.” My voice is hoarse, broken.

She smiles tenderly and brings me in for another kiss, hot and desperate, and she grinds her hips, inciting sparks of torturous pleasure. I grab her by the waist, trying to keep her still, but she rocks even harder in retaliation and smothers my moans with her burning mouth. And all the while, death chases me through the narrow field of pleasure, stabbing me in the temple, the throat, the chest, keeping me hostage on the very precipice of terror and ecstasy, until I go mad.

Veronica makes me mad.

She never pulls the trigger. She flicks the safety back on and tosses the pistol onto the floor, before throwing herself onto me, ravenous, merciless, like an impossible force of nature. The night is long and boundless, and I know that this is my reason, my *Reason*, the singular meaning and numen. Our love is god, and I would set the entire world alight in my worship of her.

I hope my characterisation of Veronica makes sense. I reckon she's got this dark side that she enjoys exploring with JD. But of course, she has lines that she won't cross and if she knew that JD was lying about the bullets, she most definitely wouldn't have done what she did in this chapter lol

Also I know shit all about guns and any research I have done is done through cursory google searches & youtube videos, so my portrayal here won't be the most accurate.

Chapter 9: impromptu q&a

Chapter Summary

a dry burger, a happy mistake, and several harmless questions

Chapter Notes

CW: Explicit language, mentions of restrictive eating, mentions of child abuse/physical abuse, mentions of s*icide, gaslighting, manipulation, emotional/mental abuse, misogynistic language.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Veronica and I part ways before sunrise instead of heading to school together. She gets a ride to school from her parents and I take my bike as per usual. We agreed to be discreet about our relationship, in case it upsets our plan for Friday night, so we make sure to keep an obvious distance between us, exchanging no more than passing glances.

We do have some stolen moments behind the main building - the stoners too high to even notice or care - and there's a small thrill to sneaking around like clandestine lovers. It's a reprieve for Veronica, I think, being out of sight of the main student body. The rumours are still making their vicious cycles and exaggerated tenfold as they ripen with time. At one point, I overhear someone saying that Veronica narrowly missed arrest after an orgy held by an insidious underground cult was raided by the cops. A hormonal teen's imagination, huh.

And Heather Duke is the newly crowned demon queen who's at the centre of all these rumours. Veronica is her target and Duke seems intent on destroying every aspect of her social life for reasons beyond me. In a way, Duke is far more ruthless than Chandler ever was.

Regardless, Veronica plays nice with her traitorous 'friends', sitting at their usual table over bits of lettuce and diet cokes. I watch them from my corner table, shoving a dry, tasteless burger into my mouth as I pretend to read my book. The patty has the consistency of cardboard, but it's better than a can of congealed chilli, I suppose.

God, she's so effortless. Smiling, laughing, and chatting away, like she's not surrounded by a frenzy of sharks hungry for her blood. I understand donning a mask of normalcy as a means to an end - I do that everyday for survival. But to engage to the level Veronica is? I'd rather shoot myself with an *Ich Luge* bullet.

“Still crushing on Veronica Sawyer?” Coke Bottle sits down opposite me with a tray laden with high priced items. The asshole must be loaded. “Didn’t I tell you to give it up?”

I give him a glower and pilfer his chocolate milk. “Don’t you have your own friends to bother?”

“They don’t do well in sunlight,” Brian snorts, enthusiastically digging into his - *is that a fucking steak?* “Anyway, I’ll be left alone if I’m seen sitting with you. And you get my chocolate milk. It’s a win-win for the both of us.”

“I’d say sitting with me makes you a target.” I stab the straw into the milk and drink half in one go.

“Haven’t you noticed? People tend to *stay away* from you.”

“If you’re using me for protection, you must be desperate.”

Brian smiles sheepishly, pushing a cut of steak around his plate. “High school’s a brutal initiation, but I intend to survive it and make millions on Wall Street. I take solace in the thought that meatheads like Ram and Kurt will be washing my Maserati ten years from now.”

I grimace, not liking the smug turn in his tone. “Sure. Wall street and a Maserati’s guaranteed when your folks are loaded.”

“My parents don’t make my grades,” Brian protests.

I huff through my nose, not bothering to respond. Everyone’s just a different brand of asshole. Brian’s is just easier to tolerate than most people, but even so, it rubs me the wrong way from time to time.

“Anyway,” Brian continues, indignantly. “At least I’m not a bully like Ram and Kurt.”

We both glance over at the jocks’ table, where said bullies are giving a skinny, nervous looking kid a particularly brutal wedgie. Those sitting at the closest tables around them, even the geeks, laugh at their antics.

Brian shakes his head. “Everyone pretends to like them, but really they’re all just scared of becoming their new target.”

“It’s not that hard to walk away,” I say, dryly.

“Yeah? And how did that work out for you?” Brian looks pointedly at my bruised face. “Anyway, you don’t get to have a say when you’re sitting here in your insulated bubble, pretending like it’s none of your business. You’re as bad as the rest of us.”

“And what would you have me do?”

Brian shrugs, chewing noisily around his steak. “Aren’t you part of a gang? Why don’t you bring them down here and get rid of the jocks altogether?”

I almost choke on milk. “A *gang*? What gave you that impression?”

“You look scary and you ride a motorbike,” Brian says, simply.

“Wow. That’s...quite an extensive prerequisite.” I lean back in my chair, head tilted as I consider something Brian said. “You want to get rid of the jocks?”

“Don’t you?” he asks, incredulously. “And not only the jocks, the Heathers too. Honestly, you can’t tell anyone I said this, but I actually thought it was a good thing that Heather Chandler offed herself. Before Heather Duke went all power-crazy, things were okay for a few days. School was *tolerable*. You know?”

I grunt in agreement.

“But now things are worse, *way* worse, because Heather Duke reckons she owns this school. I saw her sit on a girl the other day. Can you believe that? Using her like a chair. Isn’t that weird?”

“The weirdest.”

“And with football season coming up, the teachers just let the jocks run around doing whatever the hell they want. There’s no consequences for the elite, and the rest of us have to suffer for it. Pure chaos, man.” He takes the last bite of steak and licks his greasy lips with relish. “Anyway. Just one more year and I won’t have to see another Heather or letterman ever again. Did you know that Harvard chicks will bang anyone that buys them coke?”

Veronica rises and glances in my direction. There’s a subtle tip of her head: *Follow me*. And then she’s making her way out the cafeteria and towards the car park.

I stand quickly and return the half-drunk milk to Brian’s tray. “Nice talking to you, Brian. Keep your head down and your nose clean.” In more ways than one. “Later.”

“My name’s not Brian!” he calls after me, but I’m already gone, my entire focus fixed upon Veronica’s retreating back.

She’s leaning against my bike, lit cigarette held aloft by two fingers, and a half-cocked smile on her face. “Sorry to interrupt your date.”

“It was just getting good too,” I quip, flipping the collar of my coat when the autumn chill hits me.

“Bummer. Didn’t know Bentley was your type.”

“Bentley?” I huff and light my own smoke. “Of course he’s a Bentley.”

“I’m surprised that you let him sit with you.”

“Jealous?”

“No,” she says, contemplative. “Just surprised. Maybe it’s a good thing to talk to other people.”

“I do talk to other people,” I say, sliding a hand around her waist.

“I mean other people who aren’t me.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” I lean down and graze my lips against her neck.

She nudges me away, impatiently. “JD. I know you’ve got this whole lone wolf schtick going on, but it doesn’t hurt to make friends. Maybe then you won’t have to fight alone.”

“What about you? Aren’t you fighting with me?” I give her a narrow look. “Are you trying to get rid of me?”

“What? No! I’m just saying that it’s better to have allies than enemies.”

I gaze down at her gently flushed cheeks. The slight pout in her bottom lip. I brush a stray curl from her face and tuck it behind her ear. I’ve never noticed her ear piercing before.

“Veronica. All I need, all I want, is you,” I murmur, sincerely. Her blush deepens under my intense stare. “I appreciate your concern. Really, I do. But I’m perfectly happy being your boyfriend. That’s all I ever want to be.”

“That’s heavy, JD,” Veronica says, softly. She leans her forehead against my chest. “I can’t be the only person in your life.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s heavy.”

“It’s not heavy, Veronica,” I say, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “It only feels like that because love isn’t supposed to be easy or palatable. It’s messy and confusing and intense. But it’s meant to be. *We* are meant to be. You feel it, don’t you?”

She releases a long breath. Raises her head. There’s a glimmer of determination in her eyes, as though she’s made up her mind about something.

“Get on your bike,” she says. “I want to show you something.”

Her bedroom is light and open and considered; a reflection of someone far more tedious and simple than Veronica Sawyer. I wander over to her desk and grab a book she’d been reading. Some kinda hackneyed supernatural romance that’s hardly worth a dime.

“*Really?*” I flash the cover at Veronica, who’s lounging about on her bed.

She rolls her eyes and throws a pillow at my face. “Get over yourself. You watch TV don’t you? It’s the same thing.”

“But *this* book specifically?”

“I will defend my taste to the death.”

“Fleming will despair.” I toss the pillow back and sit down in the swivel chair, swinging about as I study her room. “It’s not quite what I imagined.”

“What did you imagine?” she asks, propping her head up with a hand.

“I dunno. Something smaller. Messier. More posters on the wall.”

“Not everyone has your impeccable eye for interior design.”

I squint at her, inciting a laugh. “Why did you bring me here, Veronica? I’m pretty sure it’s a bit too soon to meet the parents.”

“Why not? I met yours, didn’t I?”

An awkward silence follows as we both recall said meeting.

Veronica coughs and says, weakly, “Maybe it’s too soon, yeah.” She reaches over to grasp my hand, tugging me closer to the side of the bed. “I thought, since I’ve seen your room, you should see mine.”

“Why?” I frown, confused.

“Well...” She intertwines our fingers and squeezes. “If we’re going to do this relationship thing properly, then I think we should get to know each other. Don’t you?”

My heart sutters like a failing engine. “...Get to know...yes. I think we should, yeah.”

“Did you mean what you said?” Her dark eyes bore into mine like drills, pinning me to the chair. “When you said that you loved me. Is that true?”

What? When the fuck did I say that?

I stare at her blankly, mouth suddenly drier than parchment. “I...yeah,” I say, hoarsely. “Yeah, I do. Love you.” At least, I think that’s what this is. But could it be described using such an innocuous word? The absolute consumption of the self by another; the enduring sickness, madness, that thrives and ruins with every reminder, every glance; the overwhelming feeling of dying and living both at once whenever I’m in her presence--

“You move fast,” she murmurs, holding a hand to her mouth. She looks pleased.

“I didn’t realise there was a speed limit.”

Veronica huffs a laugh and lowers her hand, revealing a helpless smile. “Alright. Then let’s do this. Anything you want to know about me, ask away. I’ll answer honestly.”

“And let me guess. Same rules apply to me?”

“Mmhm.”

Trepidation fills me like rancid water. It’s clear that she is a bit guileless when it comes to my dishonesty, but something about this game makes me nervous. Like if I break the rules, I’ll sully the sanctity of our bond. But the way she’s looking at me is so earnest, and I’m reluctant to ruin our initial foray into true romance.

“...Sure,” I say, and I instantly regret my decision.

Veronica brightens and pulls herself onto her knees. She hugs a pillow in her arms as she thinks, brows knit together and lips pushed to the side. If only I could capture this face forever.

“Alright, I got my question. You?”

I shrug off my coat and throw it over the back of the chair. “Uh. Sure.”

“Dealer’s choice. You ask me yours first.”

“I don’t think that’s what dealer’s choice means-”

“JD,” she intones, raising a brow.

I scrub my face and swivel around to face the window. It’s cracked an inch, letting in fresh air, and the diaphanous curtains tremor with every intruding breeze.

“Why did you choose my window?” I ask, half-turning to catch her startled expression. “That night, after the party. I was a stranger to you but you climbed in through my window.”

Veronica opens her mouth to respond. Then clamps it shut, cheeks turning red. She grabs the pillow and fluffs it aggressively, as though trying to hide her embarrassment.

Eventually, she replies, “I wanted my first time to be with someone I liked.”

“You hardly knew me.”

“You hardly knew me either,” she points out.

I bury my smile, more for her sake than mine. “Is that it? Mutual attraction?”

“Is there anything else?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

She meets my eyes and something she sees there makes her blush deepen. “...I thought you were interesting. Mysterious. I wanted to solve you.”

“And have you?”

An unfathomable expression crosses her features. “Not yet.”

“Hence the impromptu Q&A.”

“My turn,” she interjects, unfolding a leg to kick the chair. I’m spun around until we’re face-to-face again. “Did you know that I had the wrong cup?”

I stare at her. “...What?”

“When we were at Heather’s house. Did you know I had the wrong cup before I gave it to her?” There’s a keen edge to her voice that demands an honest answer. There’s wariness too. Doubt. She’s not so certain of my guilt.

I take advantage of her uncertainty and respond without hesitation, “No. I didn’t know it was Big Blue until she keeled over.”

Her eyes tick over my face for a long moment; sharp, scrutinising. And then, she releases a hard breath and slumps against the headboard. “...Okay.”

So she doesn’t trust me completely. Good to know.

“What made you think that I knew?” I ask, frowning.

“It’s stupid,” she sighs. “I was confused about your reaction. You seemed so happy that she died, I guess my mind just went there.”

“I’m not happy that she died, Veronica.” I’m fucking *giddy*. “I just react to death differently. It’s probably not how it should be, with all the tears and stuff, but that’s out of my control.”

“I’m sorry, JD.” She leans forward and presses a tender kiss upon my lips.

I sigh when we part, “You’re forgiven.”

She gives me an apologetic smile and gestures for me to take my turn. Well, if she’s not pulling her punches, then I should return in kind.

“Do you think you’re a good person?”

Veronica laughs, more from surprise than mirth. “That’s a loaded question. I think ethicists would struggle to answer that, let alone a high school student.”

“A genius high school student.”

“JD—”

“Answer the question,” I say, flatly.

Her smile fades, when she realises that I’m taking this seriously. She clears her throat and fidgets with the pillow. “I think I try to be good,” she says, slowly. “I want to be good.”

“Is that why you gave Martha that letter?”

“It’s why I helped Martha at the party and turned myself into a social pariah,” Veronica bristles.

“You killed Chandler.”

“It was an accident.”

“If it was an accident, why did you fake her suicide?”

“That was *your* idea.”

“You enable the Heathers which enables their toxic rule.”

“I’m trying to survive, just like everyone else.” She slams the pillow down onto the mattress and grabs my knees. I flinch from her touch, but she keeps me locked in place with her firm grip. “JD, what is this? What are you trying to do?”

I tug her hands off me and grasp them instead, tight, unyielding. “I’m helping you answer my question.”

She grimaces. “Are you saying that I’m a bad person?”

“No.” I release her hands to gently cup her cheeks. She’s so angry, she’s burning hot. “I think you’re perfect.”

There’s a hint of understanding, like she knows that she could never reach the heights she dreams for herself. She knows that the moment she picked up that pen to forge Chandler’s suicide note, she had condemned herself. And maybe, just maybe, that isn’t such a terrible thing.

“Your turn,” I murmur, and press a lingering kiss upon her brow.

Her question comes in a soft voice, barely above a whisper. “Does your dad hurt you?”

I break away violently, like I’d been electrocuted. She’s gazing at me with an odd expression, heavy and austere, yet with a merciless edge. *Cruel*.

I don’t say anything. Can’t say anything. I mean, it’s obvious. I don’t try to hide his marks. But having it said aloud is like bringing all that putrid muck to the fore. It should never leave the obscurity of shadows, where no-one can see that it exists.

“I’m sorry,” she says quickly, noticing my expression. “That’s a fucked up thing to ask. You don’t have to—”

“Yeah,” I say, flatly. “We get into fights. It’s like Ram and Kurt pushing me around.”

“JD...no, that’s not...it’s not the same.” Mortification. That’s what she wears on her face now. And maybe pity. She stretches out her hand, but I jerk away, unwilling or unable to be touched.

“It’s the same,” I growl in irritation. “A bully’s a bully. Doesn’t matter if they’re wearing a letterman jacket or a beer-stained wifebeater. *It’s the same.*”

“You can’t really believe that. A parent is supposed to *protect* you, not *hurt* you—”

I stand up abruptly, tipping the chair over. “I have to go. My dad’s expecting me at the site. It’s been fun, Veronica. But maybe, next time, pick a different game.”

Hypocrite. Coward. Run away like the pussy you are.

She doesn’t stop me when I leave. And even though I don’t look back, I know she’s watching me from her window as I ride off down the street. The blazing afternoon sun’s got nothing on the heat of her stare. I can feel it all the way to the site and well into the night.

Chapter End Notes

Hope that wasn't too boring. I wanted to explore a bit more of Veronica and JD's relationship, because a lot of their time together was spent off-screen/off-stage. We'll get to Ram and Kurt in a chapter or two c:

Chapter 10: our love is god

Chapter Summary

a funeral, two chats, and a resolution.

Chapter Notes

CW: Explicit language, mentions of s*icide, mentions of physical abuse.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The school lets us out on Thursday morning to attend Chandler's funeral. I sit in the back pew, close enough to the doors to make a quick escape if I need to. Veronica takes her seat beside me and grabs my hand, idly fiddling with my calloused fingers throughout the mass. The main show is Chandler's corpse hosted on the dais centerstage - so no-one's paying any mind to our odd seating arrangement.

The priest heaves and blusters until he's red in the face and more than once I have to stifle a laugh. Veronica on the other hand seems genuinely upset, her eyes turned puffy and red-rimmed. I suspect it has more to do with her misplaced sense of guilt than the premature loss of her best frenemy.

"I blame not Heather," the priest shouts, reedily, "but rather a society that tells its youth that the answers are on the MTV video games!"

I cover a laugh with coughing. A few heads turn my way and I quickly school my expression into one of appropriate grief.

The priest continues, undeterred, "We must pray the other teenagers of Sherwood know the name of that 'righteous dude' who can solve their problems." A dramatic pause. And then a booming, "It's *Jeeezuhz Cuh-raaaaissst!*"

"Fuck me, this guy's a moron," Veronica mutters, rolling her eyes. She catches my smirk and, before I can say anything, nudges me with her elbow. *Behave.*

When it's time for Chandler's 'friends and family' to go up to her coffin to say their goodbyes, I make my great escape. The day is clear and bright, unusually warm for this time of year. I sling my coat over my bike and light a cigarette, basking in the heat.

Veronica lingers inside, citing that she too wants to say her goodbye, whatever that means. Surprisingly, or maybe expectedly, it's Bentley who follows me out first and asks me for a cigarette.

"You smoke now?" I hand one over anyway, humouring him, along with my zippo.

"I always have," he says, struggling with the lighter.

I huff in amusement and light it for him. This time, he makes an effort to inhale and collapses into a spectacular coughing fit.

"Don't do that, man." I drop my smoke and stomp it out. "It's always harder to quit than it is to get hooked."

Bentley glances between me and his cigarette, hesitant to expose himself. Eventually, he follows my example and drops his smoke on the ground; crushes it underfoot. "Never liked the smell of them anyway," he says, sheepishly.

"Why aren't you saying your 'goodbye'?" I drawl, tilting my head towards the church.

"You're kidding, right?" Bentley pulls out a croissant from his bag - *a fucking croissant?* - and he offers it to me. I shake my head, perturbed, and he just shrugs and takes a big bite. "Heather never gave me the time of day. I was wallpaper to her. A piece of lint. I wouldn't even be here if it wasn't mandatory."

Flakes of pastry cling to his shirt but he doesn't notice. "The jocks are running wild, now that she's gone. They shoved my head down the toilet yesterday - weren't flushed or anything so I got piss in my ears. At least do me the basic courtesy of using a fresh toilet, you know?"

"Why are you telling me this? Whatever you want from me, you're not gonna get it."

Bentley swallows his mouthful and frowns. "I thought we were..." He trails off, scratches his nose. "I thought you would understand. You're one of us, aren't you?"

"One of who?"

"You know. The freaks. The losers. The kids who don't fit into any clique."

I raise my brows. "You're a freak?"

"Trust me, I tried the whole mathletes and band camp thing. Didn't work out too great for me. I'm socially inept even by their standards."

"Huh. I guess I'm not surprised."

He gives me an indignant look. "What? Why?"

"You think I can protect you? You're not a good read on people at all."

Bentley kicks at the grass. "Well, you can't be too against me hanging around."

“What gives you that impression?”

“Do you remember when we first met? I told you to put out your cigarette. A guy like you would normally kick my ass for that, but you? You gave me a smoke and talked to me like we were friends.” He flushes and scratches at his nose again. “Anyway, I figured you were safe to be around.”

An unpleasant feeling lurches in my chest. “Like I said. You’re not a good read on people.”

The doors swing open and everyone streams out, jostling, chatting, and eager for their freedom. It sure as hell doesn’t look like they’ve just left a funeral for one of their own. In fact, I even spot a few smiles here and there. Now that she’s done and buried, Chandler’s old news - and suddenly no-one’s missing her anymore.

Veronica makes a beeline towards me and she throws herself into my arms, our lips colliding upon impact. When we part, I notice Bentley staring, slack jawed.

“What happened to discretion?” I ask Veronica, smiling. “Not that I’m complaining.”

She leans against me, hands splayed over my chest, relief etched deep into her mien. “I don’t care anymore. I just want to get out of here.”

“Slurpee run?”

The crooked grin makes an appearance. “Sounds very.” She glances at Bentley, who’s still staring at us with bugged out eyes. “Sorry, Bentley. I’m gonna have to steal your boyfriend here.”

“He’s not my—we’re not—!!” Bentley devolves into incoherent spluttering, his face turned beetroot red and darkening by the second.

“Aw. Don’t worry, baby,” I say, giving him a wink. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

Veronica giggles as we flee on my bike, her body pressed flush against my back. The street ahead of us is empty and for a precious moment, we can pretend that we’re riding out of this shitty town and taking the long, wide road to everywhere. But both of us know that we’re chained by our relative tethers: hers, a manufactured future; mine, a bad history. Our burdens are inescapable, pathological, and an impromptu trip on a low rider isn’t anything more than a sweet dream in the periphery.

We stop by the 7-Eleven for a couple of Slurpees - one cherry and one lime - and we have a race to see who can finish first. I win by a mile, being a connoisseur of frozen treats and brain freezes alike, and I have to kiss her cold lips to stifle her accusations of cheating.

Bearing Yuletide themed tongues, Veronica directs me up the sloping road towards Tully’s Ridge. “I want to show you my favourite place in town.”

From the overlook, we can see Sherwood sprawled between three mountain ridges; like an upturned bucket of legos spilled across the green. Above, the endless blue firmament is boundless and blaring, dwarfing the landscape below.

It's tedious. Suffocating. I'm suddenly detached from it all and there rises an urgent impulse to set everything alight.

"What's wrong?" Veronica nudges me with her shoulder, brows tilted in concern.

I shake my head, white knuckling the barricade. Irritation pricks at my skin like a thousand needles.

Veronica pushes her lips to the side. "Are they hurting? Your bruises?"

"I'm fine, Veronica. Why did you bring me here?"

"I told you, it's my favourite—"

"Yeah, I know. I just don't know why *I'm* here." I glance at her, brows furrowed, on the verge of a scowl.

She hesitates. "I...I thought we should talk. About the other day."

"What about the other day?" I say flatly, disliking the sudden turn in conversation.

"Things got a bit weird," Veronica says, carefully. "And I wanted to apologise. I shouldn't have pushed you like that." She touches my arm, grasping me gently before I can flinch away. "I'm sorry, JD. I was just...worried about you."

"I understand." I push out a hard breath and force myself to relax. This isn't just anyone. This is *Veronica*. She's different. She's safe. She's everything *he* isn't. "But I'm fine. Really. I've been dealing with Big Bud Dean all my life and I'm still standing. Nothing's changed - and that's a good thing."

She doesn't look very convinced, but she's learnt her lesson. "I trust you," she says, quietly.

No, you don't. "I know," I reply, enveloping her in my arms. "And I trust you. Only you."

Veronica sighs and snuggles into my embrace. She props her chin on my chest and raises her beautiful dark eyes. "I'm in a mood," she grumbles. "I hate funerals."

"They're pretty boring," I agree.

She wrinkles her nose. "Funeral's aren't supposed to be *fun*, JD. I mean that it was hard. Seeing the fallout up close like that. I had to talk to Heather's parents and it was the hardest thing I'd ever had to do. We were talking about how Heather and I were the *best of friends* and all I could think about was how I *killed* their daughter—"

"I thought it was 'an accident'?"

She shakes her head, glumly. "Even if it wasn't intentional, I'm still responsible for what happened." Her brows pinch together as she peers at my face. "Don't you feel guilty?"

"Sure," I lie.

“I don’t know how you do that,” she sighs. “Act like everything’s normal.”

“It’s easy, because it is.” When she gives me a puzzled look, I elaborate, “Look, is the world so terrible without Heather Chandler in it? Sure, things are a bit unstable right now, but once everything plateaus, you’ll realise that there’s one less Heather to terrorise the Bentleys and Marthas of the school. And you saw what happened when word got out about her ‘suicide’. Everyone came together. Important dialogues were happening. Feelings were shared. Goddamn Fleming found herself a calling as a hippie-turned-counsellor. If anything, I’d say that Chandler’s death has put the world in a net positive.”

Protest swells. “But that’s not—”

I cut her off, impatiently. Grab her by the upper arms. “*Veronica*. I know you’ve got this rigid moral code that you feel like you have to uphold. But life isn’t so black and white. Just because the law’s the law, doesn’t make it right. Think about it this way: Chandler’s death is the prevention of three *real* suicides in the future. Now doesn’t that put things into perspective?” I can see her wavering, softening. “You gotta *move on*. Chandler’s death is sad like any death is, but once you’ve cried and said goodbye, you have to move on with your own life. Don’t ruin yourself for her. She’s *dead*. And even if you decide to handcuff yourself, she won’t be around to appreciate it. It’s just a waste of taxpayer’s money.”

Veronica extricates herself from my grip. She turns and gazes out over Sherwood with heavy eyes. Her face is pale, wan, which even the honeyed glow of the sun can’t cure.

I wait patiently, turning my back on the town to sit on the barricade. I’m about two cigarettes in before she finally stirs.

“Okay,” she says with renewed determination. “You’re right. I have to stop torturing myself and just...live my life. Move on.”

I yank her into my lap, winding my arms around her waist. When I nose the crook of her neck, I can smell her flowery body wash. “And you don’t have to do it alone.” Losing myself to her scent and flesh and heat, I plant a flurry of kisses, murmuring feverishly between each one, “I worship you, Veronica. I’d die for you. You’re my reason. My *everything*.”

Her laugh dances on the wind as she endures my affections, and she cards her hands through my hair, responding in kind, telling me how much she loves me, how much she would give for me, and it’s perfect. *She’s* perfect.

“You and me,” I growl against her hungry mouth. “We’re gonna raze this world to the ground and rebuild it the way we want. We are god. Our *love* is god. And *nothing* can touch us.”

“We are god,” she echoes in a shivering breath, and Sherwood gently ceases to exist.

Next time on the Chronicles of Trashboi, our protagonist has dinner with the Sawyers and Veronica makes The Phone Call :D
Also, smoking is bad, don't do it.

Chapter 11: family portrait

Chapter Summary

a phone call, an interrogation, and three pies

Chapter Notes

CW: Explicit language, mentions of suicide, mentions of mental illness, mentions of substance abuse & addiction, mentions of domestic violence, ableist language.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

It's funny how surprised she is when she sees me on her doorstep.

"Thought I'd try something different," I explain, grinning at her blank expression. I can practically see the gears in her head fritzing out.

Veronica blinks. "Sorry. It's like seeing a monkey behind a cash register."

It's my turn to stare at her.

She blushes and hurriedly adds, "They're two elements you never think you'd see together."

"Is it really that weird seeing me use the front door?"

"Yes," she deadpans.

"Am I the monkey or the cash register?"

"You're *early*."

I kiss her cheek as I step into the vestibule. The inside of her house is far bigger than initial impressions allow. It's clean, sprawling, and painfully suburban. The off-white walls and oversized family portraits tell of a comfortable upper class family that probably have nothing substantial to say to one another.

I've seen it all before. Here is the alienated housewife who steals her daughter's Adderall, because it takes the edge off her chronic disillusionment. Here is the apathetic husband who works a 9-to-5 he hates, and lives for the dry sex and whiskey highballs his dutiful wife provides. And here is the precious daughter, a low-effort legacy to combat her parents' crippling fear of impending mortality.

Veronica notices me inspecting the portraits. “Mom forces us to take one of these every year. Dad and I both hate it, but it’s either this or listening to her cry about broken families and precious memories for weeks. It’s the lesser of two evils.”

“I don’t know about lesser,” I say, eyeing the strained smiles and stiff Jonestown clothing. “It looks like she’s holding you guys hostage.”

Veronica laughs and nudges me towards the stairs. “You’re not wrong about that. How did it go with your dad?”

I follow her up the carpeted stairs and through pristine halls, feeling more like an intruder than a guest. “I promised him a double shift tomorrow, so he wasn’t too pissed about my leaving early. Actually, he’s been kinda mellow since he won a big contract on Monday.”

“Oh? What part of Sherwood is Big Bud Dean blowing up now?”

“I think Sherwood’s safe.”

“How do you figure?”

“Well, he never says anything about the job when it’s out of town. Maybe he thinks there’ll be less resistance from me when we move, so it’s always a surprise.”

Veronica pauses and glances over her shoulder at me. “You’re moving?”

I give her a colourless smile. “It’s what I do.”

Dismay trickles into her expression. “Right. I guess I...forgot.”

Once we’re in her room, we settle down on the bed. Her, propped up against the white headboard, and me, stretched out on my side. I’ve exchanged my trench coat for a flannel and singlet since the weather’s been unusually hot. I like to think of it as the earth recalibrating itself after the fall of Chandler’s wintry reign.

Veronica hugs a pillow to her chest. “Do you know when you’re leaving?”

“No clue,” I shrug. “We’ll be done clearing the library tomorrow, so could be this weekend. Could be in a month. Depends what other work he’s got lined up in town.”

She sighs and holds out her hand. I grasp it and link our fingers together. A week ago, I felt uneasy about her touch, even when I craved it. Now, I find myself needing it to function. And by this time next month, the only kinda touch I’ll have is a weekly beatdown. How can I face the nothing after experiencing the depth of everything? It’s a future I refuse to see come into fruition. And Ram and Kurt have their part to play in that.

“Have you figured out what you’re going to say?” I ask, changing the subject.

She nods. “Heather gave me Kurt’s number. She thinks I’m finally giving in to the inevitable.”

“Mrs. Veronica Kelly,” I grin.

She pulls a face as she picks up the phone. “Never say that again.”

The call goes as well as expected. In a coy voice, Veronica invites Ram and Kurt to ‘finish what they’d started’ at the cemetery. But instead of the promised ‘sword fight’, we’ll be meeting them at midnight with two service pistols and a round of *Ich Luge* bullets.

When she hangs up the phone, we stare at each other before bursting into laughter. Mine’s a little too harsh, too manic; the anticipation of our small revolution churns solid ground into torrid waters - but Veronica’s none the wiser. She just flashes her pretty, toothy grin and pins me down on the mattress.

“I can’t wait to see their faces,” she laughs, breathlessly. “Do you think we should take photos? For posterity?”

I gaze up at her looming over me, her beautiful brown curls tickling the edges of my face. She smells like that floral body wash again and it makes my head spin. “And have their suicides linked back to us? I think a note should be enough.”

“Oh come on, JD. What if they wake up before anyone finds them?”

I palm her nape and pull her down for a long, sensual kiss.

“Do you trust me?” I murmur against her lips.

She swallows and gives a near imperceptible nod. “Yes,” she whispers.

“Then you know there’s nothing to worry about.” I trail my hand down her back, making her sigh. My other hand cradles the side of her face; her cheek flushed and warm, as though touched by the midsummer sun. “When you envision our world, do you see a place for rapists like Ram and Kurt?” She hums in the negative. “People like them and the Heathers...and my dad...they may have been the despots of the old world. But in ours, they are dinosaurs, fossilised and buried in millenia. They are cow shit. Sediment. A boring geographical feature.”

I raise myself onto my elbow, shrinking the gap between our faces. My stare is intense, enflamed, and she soaks in the heat; willingly burns. “Tonight, we raise this city from the muck of itself. We turn shit into gold. Kickstart the very heart of this world.”

“We are god,” Veronica murmurs, looking punchdrunk.

I grin and bring my lips to her ear. “That’s it, baby. You’re starting to get it.”

My presence doesn’t escape her folks’ attention. They catch me in the vestibule, kissing Veronica goodbye. We leap apart like we’d been burnt and Veronica flusteredly introduces me as ‘JD from school’.

With a pinched face Mrs. Sawyer invites me to stay for dinner. Behind her, Mr. Sawyer smiles vacantly like he's greening out or something. I glance at the paperback he's got clutched in his hand. *Eurgh. Tom Clancy.*

Well, I'm not one to turn down a free dinner, let alone a home cooked one from Stepford Wife here. I open my mouth to accept Mrs. Sawyer's invitation when Veronica slips her hand into mine and gives me a meaningful look: *Don't do it.*

The intensity of her expression just spurs me to do the opposite. So I imitate her old man's stupid smile and say brightly, "Gosh, Mrs. Sawyer. I sure would love to stay for dinner. How mighty kind of you!"

Mrs. Sawyer gives me a thin smile. "Dinner will be done shortly."

The three of us take a seat at the dining table while Mrs. Sawyer bustles into the kitchen. Veronica elbows me and whispers harshly, "Great, now *Herr Gestapo* is going to interrogate you. I hope you're ready."

"You mean *Frau*," I correct her with an innocent smile.

She rolls her eyes. "You're the first boy I've ever brought home. Do you know what that means in my universe?"

"Marriage. Two point five kids. White picket fence—"

"It means that you're officially an enemy of the state."

I raise my brows at her and she just gives a helpless shrug. "You should have run," she mutters. "Just don't say I didn't try to warn you."

"I hope you're hungry!" Mrs. Sawyer bursts in with a trolley laden with dishes which she then places upon the table in a perfectly symmetrical presentation. Beef roast, potato mash, steamed vegetables, gravy, meatloaf, green bean casserole, freshly baked biscuits, a chicken pot pie, and a myriad of dishes that I can't even place.

"I always get carried away and cook too much," Mrs. Sawyer says, filling my plate with a bit of everything. "Eat up, dear. There's more than plenty for seconds and thirds."

"Or fourths!" Mr. Sawyer chortles, and enthusiastically scoops mash into his mouth as he props open his book. "You have outdone yourself, Anne. Are you trying to impress someone?" No-one else laughs at his joke.

"Kevin, honey. No books at the table." Anne takes her seat opposite me, and primly drapes the cloth napkin over her lap.

Beside me, Veronica does the same and fills her own plate.

"So, JD," Anne zeroes in on me with a wide painted smile. It makes the back of my neck prickle. "What does that stand for?"

“Jason Dean. But I prefer—”

“Veronica has never mentioned you before.”

“Uh...right,” I say, quickly glancing at Veronica. She’s got her attention fixed upon her plate, determined not to enter this conversation. *Traitor*. “I’m new. Just moved to Sherwood a month ago.”

“Oh? And where were you before?”

“Kansas,” I say, taking a bite of the meatloaf. Holy fucking shit. *Stepford Wife can cook*. “We weren’t there long. Six weeks, give or take.”

“Are you a military family?” Kevin peers at me over his book, suddenly interested.

“We’re a deconstruction family.”

“Deconstruction? How curious.”

“Yeah. My dad’s Big Bud Dean,” I explain, trying the steamed vegetables next. What is that, *garlic*? Holy shit. *Holy shit*.

Kevin blinks at me. “Who?”

“Oh, you know, honey,” Anne says, batting his arm. “That big Texan fellow who blows up the screen.”

Kevin hums in mock interest and returns to his book.

Anne tuts and fills my glass with water. “It must be exhausting having to move around so often. And detrimental to your education, I’d expect. How does your mother feel about it?”

Anger spikes and enters my bloodstream like acid. I don’t have any mind for civility when I respond - but Veronica quickly interjects before I can get a word in.

“JD’s at the top of the class in English Literature, mom. Ms. Caddel says that he should be in the AP class.”

I lean back in my seat and send a halfcocked smile at Veronica. She flusters and takes a hurried sip of water.

“Is that so?” Anne’s gaze is a little more forgiving when she glances at me. “It is commendable that you have kept up with your studies, despite the constant disruptions.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I say, cheerily. “I like being a nomad. Means I can burn all the bridges I want.”

“Is that what you intend with my daughter? Burn your bridges?”

“Mom!” Veronica slams her glass down. “Can we *please* forgo the interrogation?”

“I saw a motorbike outside,” Anne continues, ignoring her daughter. “Does that belong to you?”

“You don’t like motorbikes?” I return, facing her head on. *You don’t scare me, Anne. My dad is Big Bud fucking Dean.*

“They’re ghastly machines. I hope you’re not exposing my daughter to unnecessary danger.”

“I’m a good driver. And Veronica loves going for rides. Really, she’s insatiable, Mrs. Sawyer. We must do it...what, like two, three times a day?”

“JD,” Veronica groans, palming her brow.

To her credit, Anne continues cutting up her roast calmly, refusing to take the bait. There’s a hint of Veronica there - her obstinacy and sharp edges. “I assume that you will be moving on soon.”

“Maybe,” I say, taking Veronica’s hand and placing our entwined digits on the table, in full view. “But now I have a reason to stay, so I might stick around for a bit longer.”

Veronica startles and glances at me questioningly. I return with a wink.

Anne’s expression sours, like she’s a mouthful of lemons.

“*Relax*, mom,” Veronica implores. “We don’t do anything crazy. We just buy Slurpees from the 7-Eleven and watch TV together. So *please*. Just cool it.”

There’s a tense pause as Anne glances between me and her daughter; silently gauging the true nature of our relationship in that one look alone. I drop the faux smile and stare back, wondering whether all mothers are this intense.

Eventually, she huffs through her nose and relaxes her countenance. “Do you wear a helmet?”

“Of course I do,” Veronica says. “I need my brain intact if I want to get into college.”

“As long as you’re safe.”

And just like that, I’ve passed the initial interrogation. I’d say that I probably have my foot in the door, just over the threshold. I’ve been marked as ‘not foe’, as of yet to be deemed as ‘friend’. Anything more than that will take longer than one night.

While Veronica and her parents make idle conversation, I finish my plate with gusto and pile more food onto it, pausing only to take the occasional breath and sip of water. Even though I’m already bursting at the seams, I keep shoving food down my gullet, because who knows when I’ll be having another home cooked meal to this calibre. A year? Maybe five?

Now and then, I catch Anne stealing shocked glances at me, but she always comes away with a smile, as though pleased that I’m enjoying her food so much.

It’s actually...pretty nice.

Despite my initial observations, Anne and Kevin Sawyer clearly care about their daughter. Sure, there's that disconnect between parent and child, but generational estrangement will always be a thing, even within the tightest family unit. Beyond that, the Sawyers are a rare glimpse into the life that was stolen from me. A life that's filled with worried badgering and weekend trips and stupid inside jokes, and it fills me with resentment and longing both.

The warmth of the Sawyers are incomparable. In truth, it's nothing like I've ever experienced. My idea of home was supplanted in me when mom was alive, but now I know that I was wrong. Home isn't tension, it's release.

When mom was alive, she and Bud always fought. And when they weren't fighting, they were in a cold war. Even if Bud wasn't drinking, he'd always been a volatile character, set to explode at the slightest provocation. And mom? She was battling the sickness in her mind; a battle that Bud and I were regularly dragged into at every chaotic peak.

The three of us were trapped in perpetual tension. Every step was perilous. Every word was gunpowder. The good times gave us just enough air to last through the bad times and not a sliver more.

This. The Sawyers. This is *more*. This is home.

"I've never seen anyone with your appetite," Anne says, her smile on the side of genuine this time. "Your mother must be pleased. No-one in this house seems to appreciate my cooking at all."

"Mom, *stop*."

But I act like it doesn't bother me. "My mom's dead and my dad's busy with work, so I do most of the cooking." I don't mention that my dad's also a drunk who somehow manages to burn water.

I scrape the last bite from my plate and shove it into my mouth. Judging by how bloated I am, I don't think I'll have to eat for the next week straight.

"I see..." Anne's features turn grim and she glances at her husband. There's a silent exchange that I don't quite understand, and when she looks back at me, she's smiling all nice-like. It makes my skin crawl. "How rare for a young man to be skilled in cooking. Your father is lucky to have such a responsible son."

Responsible? I almost choke on my saliva. "Sure, but I can't make anything like this. If it's not canned, instant, or frozen, then it's got no place in our kitchen." I say this in jest, but no-one seems really amused. Least of all Anne Sawyer, who looks like I just pissed in her gravy. "I mean it's really good," I add, weakly. "Your food. Better than a diner by miles."

Things get awkward then, so I keep my mouth shut. I don't know what I said or did to offend the Sawyers, but I'm sure my presence alone is enough to upset their delicate suburban sensibilities.

The conversation turns to Veronica's college plans, and inevitably, Frau Anne Sawyer rears her head once more.

"And what are your plans for college, Jason?" she asks, placing dessert on the cleared table. Three kinds of fruit pies, fresh from the oven. "I heard that Harvard's literature program is the best in the country."

This lady's off her fucking rocker. "Yeah. Harvard sounds great." My tone is far from genuine. "But uh...I'm not quite sure yet. I haven't really thought that far ahead."

"You're a junior, Jason," Anne chides. "That means you should seriously start thinking about what you want to do once you graduate." She pauses, taking in my ragged clothes. "There are many scholarships on offer. I'm sure your careers counsellor will be able to help you with your applications next year—"

"He didn't ask for your advice, mom," Veronica says, shortly.

"Veronica, do not speak to your mother like that," Kevin says automatically, eyes still glued to his book.

"Thanks, Mrs. Sawyer," I say. "But I'll probably work for my dad until he carks it." I smash the flat of my fork into the pie and chunky red filling bursts out.

Anne Sawyer gazes at me knowingly, as though she could see everything that's going on in my head. She takes a demure bite of her own slice of pie - blueberry.

"You are clearly an intelligent young man. It would be a shame to let it go to waste." Anne reaches over the table and grasps my arm. I'm too stunned to react in time. "'Always dream and shoot higher than you know you can do. Try to be better than yourself.'"

I blink at her, not sure how to respond other than a flat, "Faulkner."

"Correct," Anne says, smiling. "If there's one thing I try to instill in my daughter, it's the importance of defining your own future. Not by the limits of man or institution or even the self."

Is that why Veronica is on this path with me? To her, our revolution is a chance to define her own future, outside of the Heathers, outside of the school even. Maybe I was always destined to guide her, to show her just how great she can be. How great *we* can be.

And maybe Anne isn't just a Stepford Wife, even if she is irritating. "Thanks, Mrs. Sawyer."

She gives my arm a friendly pat before drawing her hand away. Weird. I feel weird. I'm missing something important, something that's real obvious.

After dinner, Anne packs me two grocery bags full of leftovers, neatly packed in tupperware containers. She tells me that I'm welcome anytime for dinner, and it's strange - I think she actually means it.

Veronica kisses me goodbye at the door, flushed and happy. “You did so well, JD,” she whispers. “I think she likes you.”

“Were we at the same dinner?” I say, incredulous.

“Trust me. It could have gone far worse. When the Heathers first came over for dinner, it ended in an hour-long lecture on teenage pregnancy and the hazards of drink driving.”

“Your mom is surprising.”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“She reminds me of you.”

Veronica nips my bottom lip in retaliation. “Take that back or I’ll shoot you.”

I’m warmer than I have been in years. I don’t think I’ll be able to bear the cold like I could before, which puts me in a vulnerable state. In the same vein, now that I know her, I can’t ever imagine a life without Veronica. I’m slowly coming undone, defenseless, left to the harsh elements with only a promise and a lie.

It makes me nervous. I guess that’s what they mean by ignorance is bliss.

Chapter End Notes

I know the movie & musical portray Mrs. Sawyer as a parody of the clueless housewife, but I'd like to think that Veronica got her intelligence and edge from somewhere. Her dad is still an idiot in this fic lol but still well-intentioned and he definitely loves his daughter.

I also wanted to use this opportunity to show a contrast between JD and Veronica's upbringing. Sure, Veronica is this edgy teen who's willing to play a fucked up prank on her schoolmates - but ultimately, she has a strong foundation that JD sorely lacks. Mrs. Sawyer may be a bit of a traditionalist now, but I think in her youth, she was deep into second wave feminism and raised Veronica with more consideration for her personhood than one might expect.

JD on the other hand, had no positive role model in his life. All he had was himself, so there was this feedback loop of hate, anger, and unresolved trauma, that compounded into his twisted anti-social perception. I think of Veronica and JD as agents on the opposite ends of the spectrum that meet halfway. There's an understanding there, but they're looking at the same world from two different sides.

Anyway, I hope this chapter wasn't too boring. Next chapter, Veronica and JD hunt some jocks :D

P.S. JD is not a connoisseur of spices and seasonings, so things like garlic and paprika are freaking him out lmao someone save this clueless trashboi pls

Chapter 12: the hunt

Chapter Summary

an intersection, four shots, and a beautiful sound.

Chapter Notes

CW: Explicit language, gun violence, blood and gore, mentions of r*pe, explicit murder, panic attack.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

I roll down the window and stick my head out, taking big breaths. My stomach's churning and I'm a second away from regurgitating Anne Sawyer's roast beef.

"Are you okay?" Veronica asks as she pulls the car up to a stop sign.

I glance at her and force a smile. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You look like you're going to hurl."

"It's just been a while since I've been in a car." I sit back in my seat and light a cigarette. It's too dark to see my hands trembling. "How far away are we?"

"Traffic isn't bad, so we'll be there in five or so. Remind me again why we're taking my mom's car?"

"The bike's too loud. If those assholes hear us approaching, they might suspect something." *And no witness is going to remember a station wagon.*

"You're giving them way too much credit," Veronica laughs.

"I want to cover all the bases," I say, a tad too sharply.

Her smile fades and she side-glances me worriedly. "JD, relax. It's only a prank. If you don't want to go through with this, we can turn around and—"

"We're going through with this." There's a finality to my tone that quiets Veronica. She pulses a squeeze around the steering wheel and the car lurches forward.

It's thirty minutes to midnight. The streets are quiet save for the occasional group of drunk kids swerving past. Another reason why I chose tonight for our revolution - drunks make for highly unreliable witnesses.

Everything is aligned. Everything is how it should be. The universe wants this, *needs* this. Isn't that what mass extinction is about? Cleansing the earth of pollutants and starting anew. In the cycle of life and death, the earth too must undergo the same mortal regime. The Chicxulub impactor, the Great Ice Age, *Noah's flood* - they are Mother Nature's happy trigger, and in this era, the trigger is *us*.

I drag a hand over my clammy face. Take a moment to close my eyes and mentally run through the plan for the umpteenth time.

We're experiencing a rare September heatwave, so it's warm and muggy, and I have the crazy idea that maybe we go and get Slurpees instead because *goddamn*, it feels like a furnace room in hell.

If we turn left at the next intersection, we'll be not a minute away from the 7-Eleven. Just one turn of the wheel and we're back to normalcy. Two kids in love, shooting the shit instead of our classmates. Just one body, instead of three.

I open my eyes. The intersection's coming up. My breath catches in my throat. I want to grab the wheel. Shout at Veronica to turn left, *turn left*, because I'm chickenshit, I'm nobody, and who the fuck am I to *revolt*? The world's a mountain and I'm trying to break it with my bare hands and it's laughable, *I'm* laughable, and reality lurches and I can't quite catch my breath and *there's no way in hell I'm going through with this*—

We turn right.

I twist around in my seat and stare at the 7-Eleven shrinking in the rear windshield. Neon green and red splashed across the black road like spilt paint. There goes another lifetime.

“What's wrong?”

Veronica's voice yanks me back to reality. I right myself, breathless, dizzy. The service pistol pokes into my side and I slip my hand into my coat pocket. The metal is cool. Inviting. It doesn't feel that good anymore.

“Nothing,” I mutter. “We should get a Slurpee after we're done.”

“It's a date,” she hums.

When I catch sight of myself in the rearview mirror, I see my wide eyes, near black in the gloom, the sickly pallor, and dishevelled hair. *Unhinged*, is the first word that comes to mind.

We park the car outside the cemetery by the front gate, and gather everything we need. Two loaded pistols, a forged note, and a few issues of Stud Puppy I pilfered from the 7-Eleven. I

also bring along ropes and gags (socks) in case things go south, but like Veronica says, there's not much chance of the two stooges catching on before we take the shot.

Veronica locks the car and checks her reflection in the side view mirror. "Should I undo more buttons? You can't see my bra." She tugs up her blue skirt a little higher, revealing more of her thighs. Her eyes catch mine in the mirror and she gives me a nervous grin.

I come up behind her and plant a kiss on her neck. "You're perfect."

"Do we shoot on three or after?"

"After three."

"So one, two, three, then shoot?"

"Right on, baby."

Veronica giggles and spins around, throws her arms around my neck. She's vibrating with excitement and nerves, her cheeks flushed a pretty pink that blooms bright even in the dark.

"I felt powerless," she says, hushed in the thick silence of the night. "Ram and Kurt are as untouchable as the Heathers, and who's going to believe me over them? I thought I'd just keep my head down and wait for everything to blow over. Maybe laugh about it too, because what's a jab between friends?" Her smile turns wry, tone bitter. "But now I feel like I'm taking control of my life again. I don't have to sit on my hands while other people tell my truth. *This-*" She pulls out her gun and raises it between us. "This is my truth."

Veronica blazes. Her dark eyes are alight, roiling and raging like dying stars, and she radiates this deep, innate power that I've only ever seen in glimpses.

My breath fails. I stand there, stunned, thrilled, unable to escape from the immensity that is Veronica Sawyer.

I cast myself into the deep shade and ready my pistol. The trees susurrate, stirred by a restless breeze. It's quiet here. Peaceful. But there's just noise inside my head.

Kurt's voice draws my attention. "Hi Veronica."

The jocks have their backs to me. Veronica's several feet away from them, smiling coyly, one hand slipped into her blazer pocket.

"Uh...so do we just whip it out or what?" Ram asks, dumbly.

I curl my upper lip and aim the gun at his back. My finger quivers on the trigger, a hair away from firing. *He's going to die first.*

Veronica bats her eyes and slides a finger over her collar, exposing a sliver of her bra. The jocks freeze. "Take it slow, Ram," she hums. "Strip for me."

“What about you?” Kurt says.

“I was hoping you’d rip my clothes off me, Sport.”

“Oh. Good idea.”

They hurriedly undress, tossing their clothes and letterman jackets onto the ground, until they’re just down to their boxers and socks.

Veronica purses her lips, stifling a laugh. She reaches behind for the pistol tucked into her skirt. Her expression takes on a wicked edge as she raises her other hand for the count.

I step out from behind the tree. *Shit*. This is really happening. This is really, truly happening and I don’t have any more control over it than a runaway rollercoaster.

“Count of three, boys,” Veronica sings.

If I don’t pull the trigger, then nothing will change. There will be no liberation for anyone, least of all me, and we’ll all be trapped in a prison of our own making. This place I’m lingering in, it’s comforting only in that it’s familiar, but it doesn’t mean shit. It never did.

“One.”

We willingly wear chains forged by powers who indulge in their pathetic idolatry and sickening Pharisaism; and we all buy into it, because we’re too poor, too afraid, too this or that, and they just get away with it unchallenged. But tonight, we have a chance to rip them from their gilded thrones.

“Two.”

Because gods don’t ascend by expectation alone. They ascend by demolishing the world and rebuilding it to their design.

“Three,” I say.

The noise in my head dies. My pounding heart stills. Everything is in sharp clarity, like I’m seeing for the first time, and my certainty is concrete. I know, in true confidence, that this is the only way I can stay alive. *Destroy, create, eternise*.

I shoot Ram in the back of his head.

The gun judders in my hands. Burns and smokes. The crack of the bullet rings in my ears as Ram silently crumples to the ground.

Kurt spins around and blanches white when he sees the gun. “*HOLY CRAP!*” He books it through the trees without hesitation.

Veronica laughs wildly, shooting at Kurt’s retreating form. She misses by a mile.

“Don’t move!” I shout, leaping over Ram’s body. “I’ll get him back!”

When I rush past, something in Veronica's face changes. Like a possibility has suddenly made itself known, and it's too shocking, too terrible to realise. I hear her yelling Ram's name as I charge through the brush, tracking Kurt by the occasional flash of pale skin between the colonnades of trees and shadows.

Even though Kurt is steroid pumped muscle, he's *afraid* - which means he's clumsy and disoriented. All those years of training mean nothing when his life is endangered. He's reduced to a mere instinct, relying only on his senses and the powerful primal urge to *flee*.

Maybe if he had overcome his lizard brain, he would have noticed the path to his right. Maybe he would have seen the lights illuminating the main gates. Or realised that the only reason I can see him is because he's *moving*.

But his will disintegrates when confronted with his mortality - something that had probably never once penetrated his psyche in all his seventeen years alive. I'm glad to be the one to wake him up to this valuable reckoning. It's about fucking time.

So it's not surprising that he entraps himself in this way, with a towering iron fence obstructing his way to freedom. As Kurt scrambles desperately up the fence, socked feet slipping and sliding on the iron bars, he stares at the other side - his future, his lifespan - shrinking away, until it becomes starlight: the pretty memorial for a cooling corpse.

I slow to a swagger and raise the pistol, tracking his head. "Get off the fence, Kurt."

The jock freezes and twists his head around, revealing a panic-stricken profile. "You killed my best friend!" he wails. "Why are you doing this? I was just kidding about the threesome thing!"

"This is far bigger than a high school rumour."

"I don't understand!"

I grin, on the edge of manic, and Kurt flinches. "This is our *revolution*," I announce, cocking my gun.

"What revolution? What the fuck are you talking about?!"

"Veronica and I. We're building a new world. A world that has no place for assholes like you."

"Stop being dick!"

I shoot and it grazes past him by an inch. He doesn't make a sound, but acrid liquid drips down his legs. *The fucker's pissed himself.*

"Don't kill me!" he sobs. "Whatever I've done, it was stupid, okay? *I'm* stupid! Just please...*please* don't kill me—"

"Sorry, Kurt, but you have to die. Consider it...a sacrifice. For the greater good."

The next shot goes straight through his temple. His head snaps to the side. Blood and viscera splatters the fence. Air escapes his lungs in a thin, agonised whistle; flesh deflating and folding into itself.

I've never thought about the sound of death until this very moment. We have this instinctual understanding of when someone is dead, even by sound alone. The exhale of the living thrums and buzzes. There's the fragments of a soul that carries with that breath. The exhale of the dead is empty and hollow. It's the sound an object makes.

Slowly, almost reluctantly, Kurt loosens his grip on the bars and arcs back, falling with a strange sort of grace. The body lands in the detritus with a soft thud and just like that, it's over.

I exhale slowly. Feel the heat of my breath escape through my lips. I thrum. I buzz. I'm alive. I lower the pistol and press my hand to my chest. My heartbeat is steady, calm. My mind is clear. Certain. *What was I so nervous about?*

"What the *fuck* have you done?!"

Veronica. She rushes to Kurt's body and crouches down, feeling for his pulse. Finding none, she straightens up and stares at me, face drawn into the stringent shadows of the night. She looks so pale and harrowed and her eyes, they hold nothing but despair. She looks at me like I'm wrong.

I smile and move towards her; pull her into my arms. She shudders and tries to escape my grasp, but I entrap her, pin her within my secure embrace. I push my face into the crook of her neck and pull in her scent. Body wash. Sweat. And something sweeter. The frazzled ends of her hair tickle my cheek.

"I love you," I hum. She whimpers in reply, but I hold her tighter; try to keep her together. "Our revolution has begun, baby. Can't you see it? The seed we've planted here. By tomorrow, everything will be different. Everything will be better."

"JD..." Veronica pushes against my chest and strains away. Her eyes are big as dinner plates and they skitter across my face, searching desperately. "JD...you killed them...you killed them..." She trails off with a broken, keening noise, like she is the one who'd been shot.

I kiss her damp cheeks and she goes limp in my arms. "We are god," I whisper, stroking the back of her head. "Our love is god."

She just has to stop being scared. She has to realise just how incredible this is. Her rapists are dead. They have more use in fertilising the trees than they do in being alive, terrorising and abusing women. And Veronica is *alive*. She's thriving. On the cusp of godhood. On the cusp of the very history we'll write together. When she realises this, she won't stop smiling and everything will be perfect.

I murmur this feverishly as I kiss her and hold her, squeezing her burning body against mine. We've become one, one body, one soul, one will, and I know, *I know*, this is but a taste of our

impending ascension. I can only imagine what it feels like at the pinnacle, gazing down at our garden as it flourishes in a way that it couldn't before.

Veronica takes a long time to respond. When she finally does, it's a fragile affirmation, but an affirmation nonetheless.

She exhales. Fragments of her soul carry on her breath. It's a beautiful sound.

Chapter End Notes

euRGH. This chapter was like pulling nails. I'm not sure why but it was incredibly painful to write. Maybe it's because I had to really get into JD's head, which is *yes* the point of this fic, but it's eurgh. It was really difficult. Anyway, sorry for the shitty quality for this chapter. Hopefully I'll do a better job for the next one.

Chapter 13: our revolution

Chapter Summary

a comic book, Anne Sawyer's leftovers, and a little ethical dilemma

Chapter Notes

CW: Explicit language, ableist language, misogynistic slur, mentions of s*icide, emesis (sorta), alcohol abuse/addiction, mentions of r*pe, emotional & physical abuse, self-harm, and JD being an absolute sh*thead.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

I'm sitting in the backseat of the car. I don't know what I'm reading, could be *Superman*, but the pages are blurred and indecipherable. I glance up. The external frame of the car disappears, and there in front of me is the library. Front row seats to the end of her life, like it was back then, like it is now, like it is every day.

The entire building is translucent and she makes for a lonely figure, entombed in her towering coffin of glass. I want to stand, call out her name, do something, *anything*, but I'm stuck fast in my seat, entrapped in a tomb of my own. My mouth stretches into a wide smile. My hand lifts of its own accord.

She smiles and waves back, a happy fluttering motion, and two minutes go past. Three minutes, ten, an hour, a *day*. The world darkens and lightens and darkens again. Clouds zip by overhead like someone's got the sky in fast forward, and in a blink a hundred days are behind us and *we're still here*, waving and smiling at each other.

A scream builds behind my frozen smile. I strain to clench my pendulating hand and nothing happens. Before me is a sheer precipice, overlooking never and nothing, and there's no more steps to take, backwards or forwards. I'm just here. Existing. A dark stain on the page or a crease in the fabric. I know she'd be heartbroken. I know she'd hate what I've become. But she just stands there in the window, waving and smiling, and that's all she's been reduced to. A fossilised mockery.

I wake violently. She disappears with the last shrieking notes of my dream and I retch over the side of my bed. Nothing comes out. My stomach ripples and twists until my head spins.

The dreams are getting worse, more absurd. I don't even think it's her anymore. Whatever creature occupies my sleep, it's taken mom's face and distorted her image, my memories.

With every dream, she slips further away from me.

Maybe I *should* consider weed.

I've sweat through my shirt, so I take a hot shower and get changed into clean clothes. It's midday and I can hear Bud's favourite child blasting sports commentary through the walls. I have the distinct urge to climb out my window to visit Veronica, but I can't see her right now. Not while I'm so...*raw*.

I need to present a strong front, otherwise she'd latch onto whatever weakness she can find and use it to run from me. Run from our revolution. Judging by the way she refused to look at me the entire car ride home, she's already harbouring traitorous thoughts. Her uncertainty, her fear - it's noxious. I can't let it poison me. At least for the weekend, I have to stay away.

This too can be considered a true test of faith. If I make it to Monday without being handcuffed, then I'll know that Veronica is mine.

I slip one of the service pistols into the waistband of my jeans. Veronica's pistol was left behind in the cemetery, enfolded in Kurt's hand. The centrepiece of the morbid window dressing. Knowing just how incompetent the Sherwood Police Department are, they'll take one look at the scene and close the case.

My fingers linger on the cool metal of the barrel. I itch to fire the gun again; aim at a moving target and indulge in that quiet sense of *being*. I'd never felt so centred. Every half-baked impression of *me* drew together into a singular entity - a real body of depth and weight - and I finally realised myself after seventeen years of anonymity. Ironic, that *Ich Luge* gave me the only truth that matters.

My empty stomach's complaining, so I risk the asshole in the lounge and head to the kitchen. As expected, he's slouched in his armchair with what looks like his tenth beer in hand, watching a football game. He gives me a bloodshot glare while I heat up Mrs. Sawyer's leftovers, and it's the strangest thing - but when I meet his eyes, I feel calm.

I've never noticed just how *small* Big Bud Dean is. In my mind's eye, he's a titan, overwhelming in his destruction and furor. Now I see that he's just this drunk old man, filling his days with alcohol and television and explosives as though they bring meaning to his hollow existence.

"I need you at the hotel, Monday," he slurs, turning his attention back to the screen. "Need you for the clean up."

"Sure thing, dad," I drawl, plating up my food. "But you're going to pay me this time."

Bud whips his head around. His face contorts as he struggles to process my demand. "*What did you just say to me?*" He's using that low voice, the one that usually preludes a clocked jaw.

My newfound confidence falters, but I don't back down. For once, I want to look him in the eye and speak to him on level ground. "I've done the calculations. I've earned enough to

cover Hudson's bills, and more. Which means that any work I do for you from now on is *my* money - as it should've been from the moment you forced me onto your sites. I won't hold that against you. Shit, I'll even waive the back payment."

If he wasn't so drunk, Bud would have me beaten to an inch of my life by now. Thankfully, he's barely able to hold his own head up, so the best he can do is turn all sorts of interesting colours before landing on *Wroth Puce*.

"Do you have a death wish?" he barks, a vein throbbing in his forehead. "If you don't wanna get kicked out on your ass, you'll do as you're told with *no complaints*."

"Am I complaining?" I raise my hands, all friendly like. "I just want what's owed to me. That's all."

"What's owed to *you*?" Bud sneers, hand turning white around his beer bottle. "Listen here, *son*. The moment your bitch of a mother abandoned us, your life became forfeit. You can work my sites till the day you die, and it won't *ever* repay what you've taken from me."

My blood goes cold. I've heard this before. It's nothing new. But every time, it hits me like it's the first I'm hearing it. I palm the counter to control the shaking. *Pathetic. Pissboy. Coward*. Take a deep breath, steady myself, because I have the sudden urge to whip out the pistol and *shoot him in the fucking face*—

I grab my plate and throw it into the sink. The cheap ceramic explodes; a shard catches my cheek. Anger spikes, surges, froths. The rest of Mrs. Sawyer's leftovers join the mess in the sink, her sentiment fodder for the garburator.

I stalk out of the house, ignoring the sack of shit spewing vitriol at my back, and set off on my bike. The quiet suburban streets whip past in an ugly blur, and I realise that there's nowhere I can go to catch my breath. No matter how far or fast I ride, I can't ever escape the blood that runs through my veins. JD will always stand for Jason Dean, and mom will always be waving at me from a library window in Texas.

Monday morning, I ride to school and park my bike beside Anne Sawyer's station wagon. Veronica's curled in the backseat, crumpled and defeated, hiding from prying eyes. I sigh and climb into the front passenger seat. When I close the door, the world goes dim.

"There's been a distinct lack of girls climbing through my bedroom window lately," I say in greeting.

"Take the hint." Her voice is dull, flat. No emotion animates her slack features.

"Okay, you're mad. I get it."

"No, I don't think you do."

"Do you need a Slurpee run?"

“They’re dead, aren’t they?” Her eyes lock onto mine in the rearview mirror - they’re near black in the early morning haze. She looks like she hasn’t slept since Friday.

I pull out a cigarette, unmoved. “Yeah.”

Veronica makes a wounded noise and drags herself into the driver’s seat. She pushes in the car cigarette lighter; stares at it blankly.

Around us, students mingle and chat and dick around, like it’s the sun and them and nothing else. They live in another dimension, and even though there’s a thin pane of glass between us, we can’t enter their world. Not anymore. We lost that right the moment Chandler guzzled Big Blue.

“We killed them, didn’t we?” Veronica says.

“Of course.”

She wrenches out the lighter and pushes it into her palm. Her flesh sizzles and smokes but she doesn’t make a sound.

I rip the lighter from her hand, barking, "What the *fuck* are you doing?" but I know what the fuck she's doing and a bit of misguided self-flagellation won't raise the dead.

“*Ich Luge* bullets!” she wails. “I’m a goddamn idiot!”

I use the lighter on my cigarette and shove it back into the head unit. Tendrils of smoke curl from my lips like silk catching on a breeze. “You believed it because you wanted to believe it. Your true feelings were too gross and icky for you to face.”

“I didn’t want them *dead!*”

“Did too,” I smirk.

Her face contorts. “Did *not*.”

“Did too.”

“*Did not!*”

I grab her wrist and yank her close. She glares at me, but she’s too wan to be intimidating. “Revolutions are revolutions because blood is shed,” I snarl. “Did you expect real change from a stupid high school prank?”

“*Revolution?* When did I ask for a revolution?!” Veronica rips her arm free and white knuckles the steering wheel. "It's all over the news, you know. The quarterback and the linebacker's romantic suicide pact. They keep talking about it like it's a movie or something and no-one knows how they really died." She gives me a wild-eyed look. “*I* know, JD. I know how they died. I keep seeing it whenever I close my eyes and *I can’t sleep!*”

I slip my cigarette between her lips and she puffs furiously, blinking hard through the smoke.

“Look, Ram and Kurt had nothing to offer other than date rapes and AIDS jokes. Some people are just better off not existing. Look what happened when Heather Chandler died.”

“Yeah, everything got *worse*.”

“Because Duke’s crowned herself queen bitch,” I retort. “What if she stops existing too? Think about it, Veronica. The school would reach an equilibrium. A senseless society would finally make sense. No-one will have to take a swan dive off the Old Mill Bridge just to catch their breath. It might feel bad now, but that’s only because you’re stuck on some otiose rules that were carved into a *rock* thousands of years ago—”

“I think there’s value in ‘*Thou shalt not murder*,’” she says, dryly.

“Let me simplify it for you.” I snatch her jaw and force her eyes on mine. “Did they make you cry?”

Veronica scowls. “...Yes.”

“Can they make you cry *now*?”

“No,” she bites, jerking away from my grasp. “But *you* can.”

There’s another trait I both love and hate in Veronica Sawyer. Her infuriating obstinance. “Just wait till you see the good that comes of this.”

“What good could possibly come of this?”

“You have to trust me.”

“*Trust you?*” Veronica gives me a narrow look and there’s a distance there, like I’m a stranger not even worth despising. “If you want me to trust you, then why did you lie to me?”

I rub my forehead with the heel of my palm. “Come on, Veronica. Haven’t you heard of white lies?”

“Don’t bullshit me, JD.”

“If I’d have told you the truth, you wouldn’t have gone along with it.”

“*That’s* your reason? You wanted me to ‘go along with it’?”

Frustration mounts to white-hot anger. “So I lied, *so what?*” I snarl, smashing my fist into the dashboard. The car judders and groans.

Veronica recoils, blanching white. Something about her reaction is aggravating, and she’s suddenly *intolerable*. My affection for her withers, leaving behind a cold hard pit in the centre of my chest.

“Consider it a small sacrifice for our revolution,” I sneer. “At least you weren’t guillotined.”

“You shot them!” she cries, hysterically. “You shot them like they weren’t even *people!*”

“Did they treat you like people when they tried to rape you?”

She stares at me with a torn expression. I stare back, silently wondering how and why this went so wrong.

Eventually, she says, “I need to think,” and clambers out of the car like she’s about to barf on her mom’s frilly seat covers.

I watch her stumble away, shoulders hunched, burnt hand clenching and unclenching at her side. And then she’s swept away by the current of students, lost to the wilds of the forbidden dimension she’s so reluctant to part from.

Instead of pursuing Veronica, I ditch the car and get back onto my bike. I don’t have any patience for the Theatre of Grief today, least of all Fleming’s bleeding-heart class discussions.

Veronica will come to her senses soon enough. She’ll realise that our revolution has already begun - and that it will continue on with bloody force, regardless of her little ethical dilemma.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, how gross is JD in this chapter???? It's only gonna get worse from here! :D

Chapter 14: dead gay son(s)

Chapter Summary

unsolicited advice, newfound love, and an imploration

Chapter Notes

CW: Explicit language, references to and description of s*icide, mentions of shooting, homophobic slurs & language, panic attack, physical/emotional abuse, dissociation/depersonalisation, JD being a poop bucket as usual.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

In less than a month, I find myself back in the same pew for yet another funeral. The Sweeneys and Kellys decided to have a joint funeral, and so their sons' open caskets sit side by side with their football helmets set upon their chests. A picture perfect staging for their entirely fabricated and doomed romance.

This time, Veronica's sitting with the Heathers at the front and I've only Bentley for company. The guy's a hell of a counsel, blurting out all kinda bullshit love advice after catching me staring at Veronica.

"It's just a rough patch. She'll come around soon enough," Bentley whispers, as the priest drones on in the background. "The worst thing you can do now is suffocate her."

I side-glance the nerd. His coke bottle glasses flash in the morning sunlight, streaming in through the stained glass windows. "Does it look like I'm suffocating her?"

His eyes flit between me and her, an entire church apart, and he scratches his nose. "I mean *emotionally*."

"I think you're reading too many issues of *Cosmopolitan*. We're not going through a 'rough patch'."

Bentley makes a small noise of incredulity. Sometimes, he's very punchable. "So that's why she's sitting with the Heathers."

"She sits with the Heathers during lunch too."

"Yeah, I've noticed that."

I give Bentley a narrow look. “What are you getting at?”

“I’m just saying,” he says, patting the air. “If I had a girlfriend, I’d expect to be spending time with her.”

“We do spend time.”

Bentley peers at me over the rim of his glasses.

“We do,” I repeat, irritated that I’m even humouring this conversation.

“Pray tell, how exactly do you ‘spend time’ with Veronica Sawyer?”

“Why does it matter?”

“It matters a great deal, according to *Cosmag*.”

I stare at him, unable to fathom just how *this* guy managed to worm his way into my private sphere. “We do plenty.”

“Like?”

“Like. Get Slurpees. Go for rides. Sneak into each other’s rooms.”

Bentley clicks his fingers loud enough to turn a few heads. He blushes and hunches down before hissing at me, “*That’s it!* You haven’t taken her out on a date! No wonder she’s sore at you.”

I furrow my brows. “Didn’t you just hear me?”

“Slurpees and screwing aren’t dates, man. You have to up your game. Take her out to eat at a place that has a dress code or go to the drive-in and watch something romantic. And buy her chocolates. Cocoa’s like crack for women.”

Despite my reservations about Bentley giving me regurgitated relationship advice, I can’t help but wonder if it’s worth consideration.

Veronica and I haven’t been on a proper date since we got together, and I never realised that it was a real option open to us. Trying to keep my head above water whilst keeping a firm grasp on Veronica had always been my priority. It also doesn’t help that my only frame of reference for relationships have been books written by dead bachelors and my asshole of a dad. Yeah, not the most reliable sources.

“What do I…” I hesitate. “How do I—”

“Do you want to borrow the latest issue of *Cosmag*?” Bentley offers with a knowing smile.

I grimace and glance at Veronica. She’s got an arm wrapped around a weeping McNamara, looking pale and solemn.

“*Fine*,” I grunt. Bentley beams in my periphery. “And stop calling it *Cosmag*. No-one calls it that.”

Bentley sniffs and pushes up his glasses, clearly in disagreement.

Two dense and grizzled guys stand by the caskets with microphones, sweating and shuffling about, all nervous as hell.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to say up here,” the guy who’s Kurt plus thirty years and a beer belly mutters into his mic. “I’m ashamed, certainly. My family has turned our town into a laughing stock. My boy Kurt wasn’t who I thought he was. When I think about the sick, disgusting things Kurt and Ram were doing...”

Ram’s dad puffs out his chest and shouts, “You wait just a minute, Paul! It is ignorant, hateful talk like yours that makes this world a place our boys could not live in!”

Surprised murmurs rippled through the pews. I glance at Bentley and see his jaw hanging wide open. I share his sentiment. Bill Sweeney, the toxicly-masculine father of Westerburg’s defensive linebacker, spouting pro-gay rhetoric is the last thing anyone had expected.

I catch Veronica shooting a furtive look over her shoulder, and when our eyes lock, she flushes and faces the front again. In that split second, we both knew that my optimism had been more than just wishful thinking.

Paul turns puce as he’s blatantly challenged. “Our boys were pansies, Bill! This whole time they were bugging each other behind our backs.”

“I’ve been thinking and praying. And searching for answers in *Stud Puppy* and *Cosmag*. After everything I’ve learned, I think it’s time we opened our eyes, Paul. Not just us, but this whole town.”

“What in the hell are you talking about?”

“I don’t care if my boy was bugging Jan or John—”

“Or Kurt!”

“--Ram is still my son and I love him all the same. Think about it, Paul. If God created us in his image, doesn’t that include our boys? Who are we to question the Almighty’s great plan?”

“*Amen!*” someone shouts, setting off another ripple of murmurs.

“You shouldn’t be ashamed, Paul!” Bill raises his hand to the sky like he’s delivering a sermon. “Our boys were brave. Knowing that folks would judge them, they were forced to hide their love for each other. But they were desperate to be free in this unforgiving world. Free to love and bugger without prejudice. So they made a final stance of defiance to the bittersweet end.” Bill sniffs loudly and claps a hand on Paul’s shoulder. Both men stare at each other, eyes glistening with unshed tears.

In a thick voice, Bill continues, “Of all people, I thought you would understand. After everything we’ve been through.”

Paul shrugs his shoulder free. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’m talking about you and me, Paul.” Bill stretches out his hand for the other man to take. There’s a hint of longing in his tone. “And what happened during the summer of ‘83.”

Paul grips his chest, beetroot red. There’s a visible struggle - before slowly, hesitantly, turning to face Bill. “...That was one hell of a fishing trip,” he says and takes the proffered hand.

The embrace is fervent. The kiss moreso. Decades of pent up desire bursts forth like a broken dam during wet season, and none of us watching can react beyond a stunned silence.

I’m the first to snap out of my stupor. Laughter bubbling on my lips, I leap to my feet and clap loudly. Bentley follows and soon, row by row, the other attendees contribute their own enthusiastic support. Just like that, Ram and Kurt’s funeral has become ground zero for tolerance in Sherwood, Ohio, where the closest thing to pride is the occasional rainbow during sun showers.

The next morning, Veronica hangs back in the classroom after homeroom. I take the hint. When the last student trails out (Bentley, who waggles his brows at me as he closes the door), a thrumming silence fills the room.

“I know what you’re about to say.” She hops onto Fleming’s desk and crosses her legs. There’s a defensive loftiness to her demeanour, and if she still had her pistol, I don’t doubt she’d be aiming straight at me.

I can’t help but crack a grin. I like this Veronica. The dark and cocksure Veronica who exudes effortless strength. This is the person who’s been hiding behind the hand wringing moralist since Friday night, and only now decided to drop the charade.

“Is that so?” I pace over to the window and yank it open. A cool autumn breeze sneaks in.

“It’s so. I can sense your smugness from here.”

I feign innocence. “And what exactly do I have to be so smug about? Wouldn’t have anything to do with Sherwood’s newest out and proud couple now, *would it?*”

Her expression darkens. “That had nothing to do with you.”

“I think there’s a direct correlation.”

“It’s not as direct as you like to think it is.”

I spread out my arms. “Look around you, Veronica. Sherwood today is not the Sherwood three days ago. Before, our arbiters were throwing ‘sodomites’ into jail, and staring at

another guy for 'too long' earned you a beatdown or a lobotomy, or in some cases, both. And now, those same arbiters are publicly supporting the town-wide initiative to throw a pride parade this year. *A pride parade*. In *Sherwood, Ohio*. Like it's the goddamn West Village!" Smoke brumes the air between us, shrouding us in toxic haze. I laugh loudly, caustically, and she slides off the desk with a restless air. "Look around you, baby! *Look at what we did*."

Her hard stance cracks. Falters. She knows I'm right - *of course, I'm right* - and she's realising that she hasn't the bulletproof rationale to pursue her pointless dissent. So I push harder. If I exert enough force, she's bound to crack wide open and crumble under the pressure.

"This is the good. How many lives have we saved? How many more people have we liberated from the oppressive forces of bigotry and hate? *We did this*, you and me. And it was as easy as a phone call and two shots."

"Arrogant," but her voice is soft and she's standing beside me, gazing out the window like she can see everything I'm talking about.

I slide my arm around her waist and pull her into my side. "Your love keeps me humble." I kiss her deeply, lingering there until we're both dizzy from lack of oxygen.

She huffs a sardonic laugh, but it's more genuine than not. Her frosted edge is melting, turning blunt.

"So who's next? Heather Duke? She started that threeway rumour. We could steal her copy of *Moby Dick* and underline meaningful passages, if you know what I mean."

Veronica stiffens. She's mad, spitting mad, her fire bellowed to pure inferno. It's brilliant and terrifying, and I find myself frozen in place. There's none of that sadism I see in Bud's eyes - somehow, this is worse. Crueller.

"No," she snaps. "Three people are dead. *Three people*. I've had enough of this, JD. It ends *now*."

I give her a mocking smile. "Or what?"

She stares at me like she's made of stone - impassive, eternal. "Or we are over."

My heart stutters. Dies. I try to breathe but there's a vacuum where my lungs should be, and I get angry too. I get angry, because she *knows* she's wrong - and yet she allows herself to wallow and wail in the mire and muck, even when I'm giving her the clarity she so desperately seeks.

I grab the window sill and loom over her. "Any war has casualties," I seethe, "doesn't mean it's not worth fighting."

"So that's all they are to you?" she replies, calmly. "Collateral damage?"

"A means to an end," I bite back.

"You say that like it's a good thing."

Something ugly rears its head. I slam my palm against the window frame, an inch beside her head. She raises her chin, flaring. "What? You'd rather go to jail? Give a free pass to the cannibals who devour people, who make this world *so unbearable*, you can't stand to go on living?"

Veronica gazes at me deeply. There's a sudden clarity in her eyes - but it's about the wrong thing. "JD, how did your mother die?"

I grip the frame so hard, the wood splinters and stabs my skin. I'm too numb to notice the pain. The distance between me and my body is like a bridgeless chasm. Impossible to cross.

"JD."

I grit my teeth and pace to Fleming's desk. I butt out my smoke on a paper she was grading. Kid was gonna fail anyway.

"She left me. That's all there is to know."

"I wish you would talk to me."

"The dead stay dead, Veronica," I snap. "My mom has nothing, *nothing*, to do with this. She made her decision."

Veronica wraps her arms around herself, austerity hanging off her in a dark cloud. She knows that this is as much I'm willing to indulge, and maybe it's indicative of where we stand.

Suddenly anxious, I take long, urgent strides to close the gap between us. The chasm shrinks to a burning sliver, and I can feel her with every inch of my being. She meets me head on, unflinching, but still guarded.

"It doesn't matter, anyway," I say, bringing my palms to her cheeks. Our foreheads bump. Our breaths mingle. "All that matters is you and me, we're special. And we have a lot of work to do."

"What work?"

"Making the world a safe place for people like us. The good, the decent."

Her soft edges sharpen in an instant. "And when does it end?"

I laugh. *Isn't it obvious?* "It ends when every asshole is *dead--*"

Her fire roars anew. With a guttural shout, she shoves me to the ground. I land hard. Skid across the linoleum and slam into Fleming's desk. Papers and books are knocked loose; some fall into my lap. Even though I know it's her, *it's just her*; I feel *his* rage pressing down on me, a dense force crushing me into pulp. I can't breathe. I can't move. I'm hot and cold, both at once, and there's this *noise*, persistent and overwhelming; torrid rapids crashing against the crumbling banks of my mind.

Somewhere beneath the cacophony, Veronica's there. Her voice, sad and tired and imploring, filters in like weak sunlight. "We're damaged. I know we are. But that doesn't mean we get to decide who lives or dies. There's no special insight we have that other people don't. We're not gods, JD. And we can't use our love to mitigate the damage we've done."

She kneels down, hand outstretched, but refrains from touching me. My head's lowered, so I can't see her expression. I don't need to. I can hear it in her voice.

"I want to be normal," she whispers. "I want to be a normal seventeen year old who stresses about midterms and prom dresses. Can't we do that, JD? Leave all this shit behind and just *be*."

There's a book on my leg, splayed face down, pages wrinkled. I can't read the title. It's embossed in gold.

Veronica's slender hands slip into view and delicately pick up the book. They smooth out the pages before closing it and setting it aside. "We can see bad movies and go bowling. Maybe camping while it's still warm. And more importantly..." Those slender hands curl around mine. They are warm. Encompassing. They ease the trembling. "We can have a proper life together. I want to be with you, JD. What we have...it's too precious to lose. *You* are too precious to lose."

She pinches my chin and tilts my head. The heat emanating from her body, her quiet imploration, her confession, they infiltrate my core. Sensation returns to my limbs. The noise lulls to a giddy hum.

A smile ghosts her lips as she brushes them against mine. *Longing*. That's what I'm feeling. The slow agony filling up my vacant spaces, it's *longing*. I buckle and break under Veronica's potent influence, and I realise with a dim wonder that I'm seriously considering her plea.

After all, would it hurt to take a break? Just a short one to make Veronica happy. Go on that first date we haven't yet had. Go bowling and camping and whatever else kids our age do. *Try normal*. Big Bud Dean's busy with this hotel gig anyway, so I can indulge Veronica - for a little while at least. If she won't come to me, then I'll have to go to her.

"What do you choose, JD?" Veronica breathes, fingers grazing my jawline. She's so close, I can see the black flecks in her irises. "A lifetime with me? Or this?" Her fingers fall to my split knuckles. Echoes of violence engraved into my flesh.

When she lifts and kisses my ruined hand, I reply without thinking. "You. I choose you."

Chapter End Notes

I reeeeeeally hope JD & Veronica's characterisations and decisions make sense here? I mean, obviously I'm just following the canon plotline, but I also want to ensure that it make sense in regards to their current mind state and motivations. I think JD recognises

that he could really lose Veronica, and so he's trying things her way for a while until he's sure she won't leave him. It's a scary and uncertain thing for him, this potential abandonment, so he's willing to do anything to prevent it from happening.

As for Veronica, she's struggling deeply with her identity and values. She does have a strong sense of morality, but she also has this dark side that allows her to access JD's twisted mindset. She can understand the potential for this 'revolution', and I think this knowledge really troubles and confuses Veronica. It also doesn't help that she's crushing hard on this guy, even when she knows she shouldn't. I suppose this is her attempt at bringing JD into the light. Give him a glimpse at what a normal life and future could look like, and chase away that scary side of herself.

Anyway, hope you enjoy this chapter. I had a bit of an easier time with it, but I did struggle with the gay dads scene. Not to mention all that homophobia flying about lol. And yes, I know Cosmopolitan is not a good source. Consider it sparkling water, i.e. don't take it too seriously. Although, as a gay, I do believe there is a sliver of legitimacy to the sparkling water thing...

Next chapter, JD joins the AV Club and goes on his first date with Veronica :D

Chapter 15: seventeen

Chapter Summary

a ham radio, a bowling ball, and a night of (confusing) socialising.

Chapter Notes

CW: Explicit language, ableist language, mentions of emotional abuse, mentions of s*icide, JD being a socially awkward sulkyboi.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Bentley waves wildly when he sees me approach in the hallway, his coke bottle glasses fogged over in his excitement. “Are you sure about this? Joining the AV Club is social suicide.”

I hold out my application form, feigning enthusiasm, “I’d have second thoughts if I had a social anything.”

The nerd snatches up my application with palpable glee. “You’re the first person to join since Charlie and let me tell you, quality applicants are few and far between.”

“I didn’t think I had much of a choice.”

“There’s always a choice.”

“Then—”

“Too late! I have sighted and approved your application. Welcome to the AV Club!”

I sidestep Bentley’s hand when he tries to give me a— well, it was either a punch or a fistbump, neither of which are appealing. It’s like water off a duck’s back with this guy, because he just keeps on grinning as he follows me into the AV room.

Much like every other AV room in every other high school, it’s characteristically gloomy and chaotic and deeply lived in. Shelves upon shelves of audio equipment and recorders and cameras decorate this room. Well loved posters of cult films are given the same wall space as Hollywood classics (*Wizard of Oz* next to *Eraserhead* next to *Repo Man*), and a makeshift kitchenette (including a kettle and microwave) tell of countless hours idled away here, long after the final bell.

There's a goth girl sitting at a computer tucked away in the corner, typing away furiously as she listens to her walkman at full blast. Sounds like The Birthday Party. At the centre table, two kids hunch over a ham radio - the first I recognise as one of the stoners who loiter behind the school. She drowsily rolls a joint while blabbering about nothing and everything to her companion - a fat kid in a Ralph Lauren polo shirt and a painfully neat side parting. Despite his demure appearance, Ralph Lauren's swearing like an ex-con (even I've never heard some of the words he's using) and fiddling with the many dials and knobs on the radio.

Not a single one notices the intruder as they focus on their relative tasks. Bentley gives me an apologetic look and clears his throat loudly.

"Attention, my fellow Techies! We have a new member joining us today." He sweeps his hand towards me with dramatic flair.

The Birthday Party cuts partway through the bridge. Ralph Lauren's inventive cursing stutters into silence. The stoner swallows her incoherent babble and continues to roll her joint. Three pairs of eyes bore into me, none particularly friendly.

I stare back, blankly, unsure of my next move. The silence is unbearable. I pull out a cigarette and shove it between my lips, before edging towards the window. There's a box of cords and miscellaneous shit in the way, but I just shove that aside and slide open the window, letting out what must be decades-old air that's more fust than oxygen.

"Our new member is Jason Dean," Bentley hurriedly introduces me in a forced sunny tone. "Or JD to his friends."

Stoner pushes her round sunglasses onto her head to squint at me. "Hey. You're the guy that reads."

Is that my latest classification? I suppose it's mild compared to all the others I've collected at Westerburg, so I don't complain. I just grunt and light my cigarette, feeling way out of my depth.

"I see you've already met Charlie Spicoli," Bentley says, pointing to the stoner. "And beside her is Amir Hunter."

Ralph Lauren starts in his seat and hugs the ham radio as though I might snatch it away at any moment. His spooked demeanour is a stark contrast to the explosive and foul-mouthed technician of thirty seconds prior.

"And on the computer is our dear president, Souxsie Seong."

"What's with the trench?" the goth snorts, yanking her headphones down to her neck. "Expecting rain, Rain Man?"

I shift uneasily and tug the wings of my coat together. There's something in her sharp gaze that reminds me of Veronica, like she's got x-ray vision and can see through my flesh and bones. It's really unnerving.

I'm starting to think that this is a terrible idea.

Bentley stammers weak appeasements while we have this weird stare-off, but I reckon Siouxsie figures I'm as dumb as I look because she backs off. Her pale face splits into a sharp-toothed grin as she leaps to her feet, knocking her chair back. "Relax, Rain Man. Can't you take a joke? I like the trench. It's very *iconoclast chic*."

"Why the new recruit, Benson?" Charlie says, tucking her freshly rolled joint behind an ear. "I thought we agreed on no more members until one of us transfers schools or commits suicide."

Bentley (*Bentley Benson? Really?*) scratches his nose with a hapless smile. "How could I refuse a special request from my best friend?"

Amir swells and billows, anxiety forgotten in this moment of outrage. "What the fuck, Ben? I thought *I* was your best friend."

"There's no need to fight over me, ladies--"

"Fucking shitgibbon."

"Just to be clear," I say, flatly, "I joined only after Benson grovelled at my feet for at least thirty minutes--"

Bentley gapes at me. It's his turn to be outraged. "I distinctly remember you enquiring after our club!"

"I said I was considering joining a club."

"And I had a club you could join. How serendipitous!"

"I'm starting to think it's the opposite." I accidentally lock eyes with Siouxsie and she laughs. The sound is thin and grating, and it fits her perfectly. I quickly avert my gaze, stomach churning.

"So you're not mute. That'll come in handy when we interview for the video yearbook." She swaggers over to me and stands there, a foot away, arms akimbo and her eyes flitting like she's appraising me for the slaughterhouse. "What made you want to join, Jason Dean?"

"JD," I say, shortly.

"Aw. You consider me a friend already?"

"If you know Benson, then you know he's full of shit."

"Yeah. I suppose you're right." And Bentley audibly chokes at that. Siouxsie laughs again and asks, "If not for my misguided vice-president, why do you seek to join our esteemed and radically exclusive club, *JD*?"

She's hard to read and I oscillate between finding her interesting and irritating. At times the feelings merge and I'm just confused all over again until she says or does something that jerks me back into that strange restless state. I don't think I like her. But I have to try - for Veronica.

I smile thinly and say, "I'm exploring my options."

"What other options have you explored?"

"This and that."

"Sounds life-changing."

"So does fondling a ham radio in a musty broom closet." That comment incites a defensive glare from Amir, who strokes said radio reassuringly.

Maybe I'm not as crazy as I thought I was.

"Well, why don't we put your skills to the test?" Bentley says, eagerly. "Principal Gowan wants us to work the game tonight. It's the first one of the season and he wants the whole thing filmed."

Siouxsie smiles, clearly warm to the idea. "You'll need to be on the field by six. It's not just radio fondling, Rain Man. We get outside once in a blue moon."

"Immortalising jock straps and scrimmages. Nothing more I'd rather do on a Monday night," I say, dryly.

"Perfect. My useless vice-president will take lead. Do as he does and you'll be fine."

"What about these two?" I ask, nodding at Amir and Charlie, who have gone back to fiddling with the radio.

"Amir's not good with crowds," Bentley explains. "And Charlie—"

"I'm too lazy," Charlie interjects, yawning.

"Charlie's lazy."

I sigh and tap ash out the window. From up here on the second floor, I can see the deserted car park and the football field beyond that. Tiny red figures in white helmets scatter and merge and scatter again, stark against the emerald green canvas.

Veronica would be with the Heathers right now, terrorising the rest of the student council members. Duke's latest project is pushing out the current student body president and taking the throne for herself, because apparently Chandler's seat isn't gilded enough for her. And Veronica's attempts at real engagement would go unheeded (as they always do), and all she'll be able to do is grit through it, and later complain when we go for our daily Slurpee run.

Is this normalcy? While the world rankles in the periphery, we just grin and bear the abuse and dismissal, the tiresome pettiness, inconsequential *bullshit*, for what - for aesthetic? A dream of something we're not and never could be? I have to keep reminding myself that this is for Veronica. A honeypot to soothe her angst before I return her pistol. Normalcy, I can play at, but I'll never cross the threshold. Never be immersed. This is a dimension lost to me, as it is to her - only, she's not yet ready to leave.

I have to be patient. I have to play along. Otherwise, our revolution will be finished before it's truly begun.

"JD?"

I glance at the 'Techies'. Their expectant stares. I give them my best Bentley smile and say with mock enthusiasm, "I wouldn't miss it for the world!"

"No."

Veronica hugs my waist and peers up at me, lips pursed at my easy rejection. "I know it's not ideal—"

"This is supposed to be our first date," I say, dismayed. "How can we have a date when there's four other assholes tagging along?"

"Bentley's *your* friend, JD. And Martha isn't an asshole."

"Why the fuck would you invite them?"

Veronica lets go of me and flops onto her bed with a dramatic sigh. "I didn't. I was talking to Martha about our plans for tonight and the Heathers overheard and they pretty much invited themselves. I couldn't *not* invite Martha after that."

"Why not?" I toss my coat onto Veronica's desk and absently flick through her latest vice: sapphic succubus nuns. Interesting choice. Not to my taste, but it's miles better than paperback romances about vampires.

She gives me an incredulous look, like the answer should be obvious. "*Because*, JD, despite what you might think of me, I'm trying to be decent."

"You're better than decent."

"See, when you say it, I don't know if it's a compliment."

"Would you rather me call you a bitch?"

“Pot kettle.”

I flash her a smirk and her cheeks darken as she flips me off. “Okay, but that doesn’t explain Benson.”

“Well, actually,” Veronica grins, mood switching faster than I can comprehend, “Martha’s the one who invited him.”

My brows couldn’t rise any higher. “Does that make sense to you?”

“I guess she’s moved on from Ram.” I don’t miss the sudden tightness in Veronica’s voice, or the obvious way she busies herself with a pillow to avoid my gaze. *Is she still mad at me for that?*

“I didn’t even know they knew each other.”

“Yeah, neither did I. But Martha seems to really like him.”

Something about this doesn’t feel right. There’s an anxious niggling at the back of my mind, but I can’t quite place why it’s there. I try to come at it from different angles, and while I don’t see what Martha benefits from being with Bentley, I also don’t see how it detracts me. So I’ll drop it for now. There’s a more important issue at hand anyway. “This was supposed to be our first date,” I repeat, frowning. “Not a class trip.” And with the *Heathers* no less.

Veronica rolls onto her front and grins at me, chin in hands. “Don’t be jealous. It’s not attractive.”

“Oh, so *that’s* what I am?”

“Shut up,” Veronica laughs. “This will be good for us, JD. Going bowling with friends is *normal*.”

“So are first dates.”

Instead of replying, she just holds out her hand expectantly, dark eyes glinting in the late afternoon light. I put down the book and walk towards her like I’m hypnotised, forced along by a will larger than my own.

I take her hand and she yanks me down to my knees and our lips crash into each other. I lose myself in her for a time, anger and confusion sluicing away like dirt in the cool, cleansing rain that is Veronica Sawyer. When we break apart, I’m grinning like an idiot, and suddenly I don’t really care about our non-first-date. As long as Veronica’s there, I can just about tolerate anyone.

“Fine,” I say, wiping the grin off my face. But it’s too late, she’s seen it, and she giggles and hangs over the edge of the bed to peck my jaw. “But you owe me a date, Sawyer.”

And that’s how I find myself here at Sherwood Starlight Lanes, trying to be ‘normal’ with the most mismatched group of people. The *Heathers* have been appropriately catty all night and

now they're trying to pick up the frat boys in the next lane. Bentley's acting the perfect gentleman with his date, and Martha's been blushing and blanching in turn, depending on whose attention lands on her. Veronica's the glue that's holding us all together - the heart of this discordant social microcosm. She's trying hard, I know, and I can probably try harder, but even just sitting here in close proximity to Duke is like having my teeth pulled - *without* the laughing gas.

"Are you okay?" Veronica hands me a soda before choosing her ball from the rack. The others are occupied - Martha's instructing Bentley on his bowling form and the Heathers are lolling around the next lane, chatting to a gormless looking frat boy with a backwards cap.

"Just dandy," I drawl.

"Do you have a headache? I have some aspirin if you need it."

"I'm just wondering how long a game takes."

Veronica hugs her ball and gives me a crooked grin. "You don't go out much, do you?"

"I go out plenty."

"You know, JD, you could *try* to have fun. Sitting here and moping about isn't going to make the night any more bearable."

I raise and shake my book in mock outrage. "I am *not* moping about. I am *reading*."

She plucks my precious cargo from my hands and tucks it into her purse. "No books. Go and talk to someone. Anyone. At least throw a damn ball."

"Throwing balls will make me normal?"

"At a bowling alley, yeah, it will."

I watch Bentley do a perfect strike, and Martha claps excitedly by his side. They talk loudly, expressively, and they give each other a two-handed high five. Even for people who are ostensibly socially inept, they sure do make it all seem effortless.

"Give them a chance," Veronica says, slipping her fingers into the ball and hoisting it upright. "People have a way of surprising you." She smiles and turns to join Martha and Bentley in their mini celebration.

Before I can figure myself out, Heather McNamara plops down beside me with a sunny smile. She brings with her an intense wave of perfume that smells like candy, and her doe-brown eyes glitter as brightly as her lip gloss. Even so, out of the Heathers, McNamara has always had the least offensive presence.

"Having fun?" she asks, clasping her hands together in her lap. She's kinda tense and shrunk into herself, like she's unsure whether I'll respond by words or by bite.

I suppress the urge to roll my eyes and say with a smile to match hers, "The *funnest*."

McNamara giggles, uncertainly. “I don’t really like bowling either. Heather just likes to come here because of the college guys.” We both glance at Duke who’s making out with Backwards Cap. I take a sip of my soda to get rid of the foul taste in my mouth.

“You don’t like college guys?” I ask.

She wrinkles her nose as if the thought repulses her. “They look really old. And they’re always so...handsy.”

I huff amusedly. “And you decided that I was better company.”

“Sure, why not?”

Now it’s *my* turn to be uncertain. But Veronica told me to *try*. And this is trying, isn’t it? I rub my nape, hyper-aware of myself. “You’re a Heather,” I point out, uselessly.

She hums and twirls the end of her ponytail. “Yeah, but I like talking to people. Conversation with Heather can be a bit...one-sided. And the guys don’t really care about anything outside of football, so I like talking to other people. Especially freaks like you.”

My expression flattens. “Why’s that?”

“I dunno,” she giggles. “You guys say the craziest things. It always makes me laugh.”

“I’m glad we’re so entertaining.”

“No, it’s more than that.” McNamara taps her chin, brows furrowed in deep contemplation. “I like how people can see the same thing so differently. I have a problem with that, you know. Heather calls it my tunnel vision. Says I won’t ever get anywhere or be anyone because of it. So when I hear people talk about their thoughts on stuff, it’s really exciting for me. Like I’m getting a really important clue or whatever.”

She’s not the most eloquent, but her sentiment is clear, and it stuns me enough to knock the sarcasm outta me. Just for a moment. “...I get it,” I say, genuinely.

McNamara blinks at me. “Really?”

“People say I have tunnel vision too.”

She stares at me like she’s seeing me for the first time. “Wow. I thought you had it all figured out, but you’re just dumb like me.”

“Do you believe everything people tell you?” I narrow my eyes, trying to discern her expression.

“Yes. I think so.”

“Even when they’re obviously lying?”

Confusion ripples across her face. “What do you mean? Who’s lying?”

“Everyone. Especially Heather Duke.” I set my soda down and lean towards her, lowering my voice. “Have you considered the possibility that *you* are the one seeing things for how they really are?”

“I am?”

“If everyone tells you that you’re wearing purple, would that change the truth for you?”

She glances down at her yellow blazer and skirt, mulling over my words. “...No. Yellow’s my colour, everyone knows that.”

“Right. So if they tell you that you wear purple—”

“-they’d be wrong.”

“Even if you’re the only one who sees yellow?”

She hesitates at that. Stares down at her clothes again with an intense focus. After a long while, she comes up for air. “It’s yellow,” she confirms, confidently.

“People struggle to grasp objectivity because it challenges their flawed truth. They call it tunnel vision. They call it limiting. Selfish. But actually, it’s the opposite. Some of us, we can see it all, outside of the corruption and affects, and that makes us *better*.”

McNamara rubs her wrinkled forehead, looking lost. “You’re being nice to me, aren’t you?” Her visage relaxes and she gives me a guileless smile. It makes her look much younger than she is. “Don’t worry, JD. Even when Heather tells me that I won’t be anyone, I know she’s wrong. I tune her out when she gets all mean like that, anyway.”

I grab my soda and bite down on the straw. “Why are you friends with her if she treats you like shit, huh?”

“We’ve been friends forever,” she says, shrugging. “And our names are the same.”

“That’s your reason? You have the same name?”

“Heather wasn’t always like this. When Heather was still alive, Heather and I were like sisters. She was always the one standing up for me. She was my best friend. But then Heather died and now...I don’t really know who she is anymore. I don’t even think *she* knows, so she gets angry and takes it out on me.”

“Then leave her.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

Her smile softens, saddens. She gazes at Duke with a distant expression, like she’s recalling a memory. “Sometimes we stay with people who aren’t good for us, because they aren’t good for us.”

I raise my brows, unnerved by her sudden shift in demeanour. Before I can delve any deeper, the others sans Duke joins us on the bench.

The rest of the night continues without any more interesting developments. Duke eventually ditches us to go to a Remington party with Backwards Cap and McNamara, stupidly loyal as she is, obediently follows. The rest of us finish up the game (Martha wins and Veronica comes a close second), and we get pizza on our way home.

As I sit there in the pizza parlour, vaguely listening to the idle chatter around me, I keep thinking about it, my conversation with McNamara. I know that her reasons for staying with Heather aren't any less pointless than Veronica's for joining the Heathers. But why do I feel so damn uneasy about the whole thing? Like maybe McNamara and Veronica are seeing something obvious that I'm missing completely?

I hate feeling like this. I hate being confused about things that should be easy and straightforward. People usually *are* easy and straightforward. They follow the same script, the same choreography, over and over. I can pick them apart and see their beginning and end like a meteorologist can read the sky. But there are anomalies that threaten my certainty, make me question myself, and I can't help but think that they're doing it on purpose. A pathetic, hand-wringing part of me thinks that they have this secret knowledge that will forever elude me, because they are more than I'll ever be. And it kills me, twists me up so ugly inside, and I just want to shuck my skin and be someone else. But I can't. So I sit with it. Stew in it. And let it fester and fester until I can hit play on my revolution, and return to the comfort of my - of *our* - budding garden.

Chapter End Notes

Erm I dunno what this is but here you goooo! Can you tell that I adore Heather Mac (even if she is an asshole lol)

Also, did anyone pick up on all the 80s music/film references in the AV Club scene? :D

Next time Veronica and JD play another round of Q&A and shit gets real.

Chapter 16: ich wahrheit

Chapter Summary

Tears for Fears, tears for fears, and an impossible dream.

Chapter Notes

CW: Explicit language, mentions of physical & psychological abuse/bullying, depiction of s*icide, disassociation, trauma/PTSD.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

After dinner, Veronica and I head to hers for the night. As usual, she enters by the front door and I the window, and we eventually find ourselves lounging on her bed, listening to the midnight radio.

Now that we're alone, I can release the tension of the day and forget myself in this person beside me. Every delicious twine of her, I thread into my memory: the scent of her floral body wash; the remnant lemonade sweetening her mouth; her heat and softness which I try to contain in my arms, embrace and lock, never to release.

Veronica traces patterns on my chest, humming along as Roland Orzabal sings about 'sowing the seeds of love'. I gaze down at her, half-propped up against the headboard, fuzzy with contentment. I'm feeling oddly optimistic, so much so that I start taking the dangerous path of thinking that maybe this normalcy isn't such a terrible thing, and the dark thoughts gnawing at me earlier are vague lingering impressions that are easily dismissed.

It'll hit me again when I leave Veronica in the morning. It always does. She's like opium, hard to ignore in all states, but especially potent in my arms. During these moments, everything else dissolves and I don't need to be so...wounded.

"You seem better," Veronica says, tilting her head to meet my gaze.

"Well, Bentley's not around playing marriage counsellor."

She chuckles and raises her hand to card through my hair. It's getting long, but unless I want to look like I've gone three rounds with a lawnmower, I'll have to wait to have it cut. "He's just trying to help," she chides. "Looked like you and Heather were getting along."

"Apparently I'm entertaining."

“You didn’t know that?” Veronica smiles crookedly and pinches my chin. “You’re more than entertaining, Mr. Badass.”

“Are you friends with McNamara again?”

She purses her lips. “I was never not friends with her.”

“Even after what she did?”

“Mm. I wouldn’t be surprised if Heather Duke had a hand in it.”

“She’s got it out for you.”

“Heather Mac’s a follower. Does whatever Heather tells her to do. I don’t think she necessarily agrees with her most of the time.”

“Sounds like you,” I say, bluntly.

She narrows her eyes at me but doesn’t contest. “Not anymore. Not since Heather Chandler died.”

“Then why does Duke tolerate you? You still sit together in the cafeteria.”

“Honestly, I have no idea,” Veronica sighs. “Maybe she thinks she can control me better this way. Friends-close-enemies-closer kinda thing.”

“And all this bullshit with Duke. Is it still worth it to you?” I give her a pointed look and she just rolls her eyes before resting her head on my chest.

Her lashes fall low on her waterlines, casting a contemplative shadow over her gaze. I wait patiently for her to respond, and when she does, her voice is quiet but clear. “Before I joined the Heathers, I was a freak. This wouldn’t bother me normally - I mean, it never really did in middle school - but I wasn’t the no-name kind that floated around in the background. I stood out just enough to catch the attention of the popular kids, and they did everything in their power to make my life unbearable.”

“The Heathers?” I ask, creasing my brows.

“No, the main perpetrators were the seniors during my freshman year. Before the Heathers took over the school. I suppose you could call them the Original Heathers.” She huffs a bitter laugh. Through her lashes, cold spite glitters like crystalline ice. “Everyday, I endured six hours of hell. At first, I could deal with it. Pretend that it didn’t mean anything to me. But then it got physical. And I couldn’t pretend anymore.”

She falls into a deep silence. Now The Cure’s playing on the radio. *Lovesong*. It’s oddly apropos. I push my face into Veronica’s curls and kiss her temple.

“It was bad, JD,” she continues. “Worse than whatever the Heathers could ever do to me. This is the better alternative. I can survive Heather until graduation. But I can’t survive being a freak for one more day. I’m done with it.”

“You didn’t have me back then.”

She side-glances me with a wry smile, more prickle than warmth. “I’d like to get through the school year without killing anyone else, Mr. Badass. But thank you.”

I frown, unable to ascertain her intent. “That’s not what I mean, Veronica.”

“...I know.” Her expression softens, but that wary edge never truly dissipates. “I know you’re making an effort. I’m sorry.”

“I could be doing more,” I say, noting her lingering distrust.

“No, you’re doing enough. You’ve joined the AV Club. You went bowling with friends. You’ve stopped talking about murdering our classmates. I mean, there’s not much more normalcy you can cram in until it starts becoming pathological.” She huffs a laugh and rubs my chest, reassuringly.

I’m unconvinced. She might smile and laugh and act the part, but something vital was damaged when I killed those moronic jocks. Clearly, pretending to be normal isn’t enough to repair whatever’s broken in Veronica.

I need to do more.

“Impromptu Q&A,” I say, suddenly.

Veronica blinks up at me.

“Like last time,” I explain, smiling. “We pose questions to each other and answer honestly. Let’s do it.”

“That’s fine...but why so eager? Last time—”

“I wasn’t really into it then, but I am now. I’m all in, Sawyer. Are you?”

She stares at me for a long time. Longer than usual. Her expression is murkier than my brain after a bottle of Jack Daniels, and I think that maybe I fucked up. Maybe this isn’t the time to be playing games. And I’m about to recant my request, when she finally stirs and acquiesces.

“Okay,” she hums, a curious gleam in her dark eyes. “Okay, I’m in too. Dealer’s choice.”

I take a shallow breath. An easy one to begin with. “Are you still mad at me?”

She looks startled, almost shocked, but I don’t know why. A breathy laugh escapes her as she settles. “I’m not mad, JD,” she says, raising herself onto her forearms. At this intimate angle, her dark eyes swallow me whole. “I mean, I kinda am. But...I know in a way, you did it for me. And you’re really trying to change, I can see that.”

I furrow my brows. “We’re not the same as we used to be.”

“And that’s normal,” she grins, lopsidedly. Her fingers drift between my brows to smooth out my consternation. “People change. Relationships change. It’s how things work. We go from point A to every which way, and that’s the fun of it. Isn’t it?”

“...I don’t like it.”

Her laugh is clear and loud and it sends heat surging through my body. “Well, the world’s not going to stop spinning for you, JD.”

It should. It has. It will.

“Okay, sourface,” she grins, poking my cheek. “I’ve got a burning question for you. What do you want to do after graduation?”

My mind goes blank. *After* graduation? I haven’t considered life beyond homecoming, let alone two years from now. I stare at her and she stares at me; steady, flushed, expectant.

The gloom of the night deepens the brown of her eyes and hair, turning them black, and the warm glow of the lamp honeys her pale skin. There’s a haze, a film before my eyes, that makes her look like a fever dream. And then her rosy lips slant, one side tugged higher than the other, and her cheeks swell and her gaze turn to dawning suns, and just like that, I know my answer.

“I want to be with you,” I say, honestly. My heart's pounding so hard, I’m sure she can feel every frantic beat. “I want to...keep being normal with you. Do the whole normal-people thing. Marry. Have kids. A dog. A house. I want to do Christmas and Halloween and buy all the decorations. I want to put our kids’ shitty drawings on the fridge door. I want to take them to the zoo and buy them ice-cream. I want to get matching dish sets and have Taco Tuesdays and go on vacation. I want to die in mundanity. All the normal things. With you.”

Pretty words are pretty words. None of it's enough. None of it can express this bone-deep, soul rending heat now roiling in my chest. It burns me bad, fills me up until I’m fit to burst; and it’s just her. It’s *her*. I immerse myself in the strain, the scorch, the everythingness of it all.

They say you fall in love, and I think that's the perfect word for it. Falling isn’t graceful or easy or kind. Falling is violent and wretched. It gives you scars. Ugly scars. Kills you dead, if you land wrong.

I reckon if there’s anything worth falling for, it’s Veronica Sawyer. She’s the only thing that’s right in this broken world.

Veronica goes quiet when I finish talking. Keeps her head low. A sudden gust rattles the window pane, and the lamplight flickers like a candle in the wind.

In the end, she wriggles deeper into my embrace and buries her face in my chest. Her breath is unsteady. It dampens my shirt.

I think for once, honesty worked in my favour.

“You’re leaving me anyway,” she murmurs, turning her head just enough to release her voice. Mussed brunette curls tickle my chin. “When you move, we’ll have to end it.”

“No.” I smooth down her curls to catch her expression. Her lips are pursed in a near pout. “I’ve decided that when he goes, he goes alone. I want to stay with you, Veronica, and Big Bud Dean ain’t gonna keep us apart.”

“Will he let you stay?”

“I’ll make it work.”

Her concern wavers. Weakens. Breaks. She’s too pleased to nitpick my plan. Instead, she throws her arms around my neck, her relief palpable. I drag her deeper into my arms, until she’s practically lying on top of me. I welcome her weight. It levels me. Centres me. Makes me feel whole.

“Oh, *good*,” she laughs, breathlessly. “I was worried that I’d have to find you and drag your sorry ass back home.”

I catch her chin and raise her face to mine. Press a soft kiss upon her lips. It’s really no more than a graze, but enough to make her breath stutter. When we part, I’m simmering. “You can’t escape me, Veronica Sawyer. I’ll chase you down to hell if I have to.”

Her dark eyes glint at the threat. “It’s your turn.”

Something’s changed. Again. She doesn’t have one foot out the door anymore. Her certainty in me has cemented, like she’s made a real decision between now and five minutes ago. I can breathe, for the moment.

I put some thought into the next question. Indulge in my curiosity. “What are you most afraid of?”

Veronica hums a laugh. “Wow. That’s a big one.”

“Really? I thought it was relatively harmless.”

She rolls her eyes. “Alright. Since we’re going to get married, I suppose you should know these things about me.”

I can’t tell if she’s joking. I assume she is, by the way she’s smiling.

Veronica lolls in my arms until she’s angled onto her back. Her heavy-lidded eyes trace the shadow clusters on the ceiling. “Sometimes, I feel so lacklustre compared to the people around me. I try real hard, I do, but I’m scared that one day, I’m going to disappear completely, and some asshole’s going to use my name and wear my face and no-one else will know the difference. Veronica Sawyer won’t be *me* anymore. She’ll be whoever finally snuffs me out.”

I hesitate, stalled by confusion. “You’re not lacklustre. You know that.”

"Do I?" she smiles, weakly.

"You do," I insist. "You should. You are the most...*most* person I've ever met, Veronica. There's no way you could ever lose yourself. It's like losing track of the sky. Stupid. Impossible."

"The sky?" she covers her mouth and stutters.

I frown. "Not the best analogy I know-"

"No, it's perfect," she gasps.

"Fine. Then me. It'll be like trying to get rid of me. Stupid. Impossible."

Veronica chuckles. "You're a tick, I get it." She sticks two fingers in the corners of my mouth. Forces them upwards into an artificial smile. "Anyway, that's my answer. And now it's your turn. I want to know the same thing."

There's an instinctive surge of panic. A primal urge to withdraw, retreat. Then I remember I'm falling, and falling is never easy. Never kind. There's no way I'm coming out of this unscathed.

"I'm afraid..." I trail off, and for a wild moment, I think to just end it there. What am I *but* afraid? Every second of every day. Afraid, afraid, afraid.

"JD?"

She's waiting. I need to give her what she wants.

I rake a restless hand through my hair. What stability I've drawn from Veronica has vanished like smoke to the wind. She notices my unease and pats my chest.

"I'm afraid that...you might leave me," I say, slowly. "Like my mom did."

Her hand stills. Eyes flinch wide. They're like osmium weights on my face and it takes everything in my power to ignore them. Instead, I glare at her desk. There's a new pile of books I don't recognise.

"JD..." Her tone is delicate. Careful. "Can you tell me what happened?"

My stomach clenches painfully. Twists itself into a stone-hard knot in my centre. There's a bad taste in my mouth - bitter, ashen. "You really want to know?" I'm trying not to sound too reluctant, but it slips out in a reedy note. Like I'm clogged up or something.

"I do."

So then, I tell her.

"My dad said it was an accident. But she knew what she was doing."

I tell her how mom drove us up to the demolition site. About how I was in the backseat, reading a comic book that I can't quite remember. The sign I saw through my window that I remember as clear as day: *Alswell Public Library*. And I tell her about Alswell itself, a shitty podunk town smack-dab in the middle of Texas.

I'm numb. Cold. The thrum of the engine dies. The car creaks and settles. Mom's in the driver's seat. I can only see the back of her head, a sliver of her profile, and I think that she looks lonely. I don't dare look away from her, because I'm scared that she might crumble away like wet sand. It's stupid. Illogical. But I'm convinced that I'm the reason she's maintaining her form - so I keep my eyes fixed on her. I keep staring, not blinking, not breathing, and when she moves, when she finally moves, I think that I've won. I've won and she's safe and I can finally look away.

So I do. I look away. I look at my comic instead. And I miss her when she turns around. I miss her expression, her face, and I can only imagine what it looks like. Are her eyes full of tears? Or is she smiling like she always does, even when she's sad?

She says something. Her voice is garbled. It's either an apology or an assurance, and then she says my name. Not JD. She calls me Jason.

Jason, warm and easy, a light skip down two steps. Jason.

When I raise my head, she's outside, ducking under the yellow hazard tape and strolling to the condemned library. I'm confused. I know that you're not supposed to go beyond the yellow tape. But it's mom. I trust her implicitly. I trust her to know better than me, so I sit there, watching, never once thinking I should follow her. Never realising that I should stop her. No, because I trust her.

I trust her to always be my mom. To always be here. She is my centre, my rock, my world, and for her to betray me in a way that is - so completely annihilating - is unimaginable.

That's not what moms do.

(Idiotic, naïve, gullible)

There she is, waving at me from the window.

The comic falls.

There she is, waving, smiling, beaming, more animated, more excited than she's ever been. She seems happy. Relieved. And I think that something wonderful must have happened, so I get excited too. I bounce up from my seat and wave back and I laugh. I laugh and laugh, even when the library explodes.

Kaboom.

I laugh. Rogue debris showers the car. I think I see blood. Bits of flesh. Bits of mom. I keep laughing, because there's nothing I can do. I'm gouged. Critical. And my mom is gone.

“She left me,” I finish, detachedly. I can’t feel my body. I’m in two places at once, or maybe not anywhere at all. “She decided to stop being my mom.”

“Oh, JD. I’m so sorry.” I barely register her hands on my face. My cheeks are damp.

“It’s okay.” *No, it's not.* “The pain gives me clarity.” *I want it to stop.*

In the end, we just lay there, holding each other tightly. I don’t know if I ever stop crying, but at one point, she kisses me tenderly and murmurs reassurances. Comforting sentiments that she won’t ever stop being mine. She will never leave me like mom did. Never betray my trust. I don’t know if I believe her. But for the rest of the night, I let myself believe - because even if it’s a lie, it’s sure as hell a pretty one.

Chapter End Notes

I'm very very sorry for the lateness! I just wrapped up the year at work and now I'm on a three week break (wahoo!). So I'll have more time to work on my writing :D

Here's a fluffy(?) chapter where JD really lowers his walls for Veronica. Buuuuut this is a guy who has always found stability in his many defences. What happens when he loses his only stability? I can't imagine anything good~ :3c

I.e. Expect lots of angst and drama in the next chapter!

Anyway, thank you for your kudos and comments and bookmarks thus far.

It's super motivating to see your encouragement and I truly appreciate your reading this silly fic <3

I'll do my best to get another chapter out before the new year, but if I don't see you before then - I hope you and yours have a wonderful new year! Be kind to yourself and do at least one nice thing for yourself every day. Today, I'm going to play a bit of FFXIV without letting myself feel guilty for not doing anything 'productive'.

P.S. I know the chapter title might not be grammatically correct (I don't know shit about German), but I wanted something that's the polar opposite to 'Ich Luge'. So consider it erm...an artistic choice lol VuV;;

Chapter 17: a frozen lake

Chapter Summary

a determination, deterioration, and a misplaced note.

Chapter Notes

CW: Explicit language, ableist language, misogynist slurs, alcohol abuse & addiction, self-harm, insomnia, delusions & hallucinations, paranoia, mental breakdown, panic attack, mentions of physical abuse, gaslighting/manipulation, reference to statutory rape, JD being a toxic berk.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The timing couldn't be better. All this shit about mom that's being dredged up; it's like a bad case of the flu that keeps coming back every year. Bud doesn't seem to care or notice that the anniversary of the Alswell *kaboom* is next week. Then again, given his increase in drinking, I suppose he does remember. He just doesn't want to.

I don't exist for him during this time of year. For these three sparse weeks, Big Bud Dean has no son. No dead wife. Just his beloved deconstruction and the dregs at the bottom of his beer bottle.

I think we both unravel in our respective ways. Mine's just harder to see.

"Jason? Are you present?"

"JD," I say, curtly.

Fleming doesn't blink. She just raises her brows and gives me a look soaked in condescension. "*JD*," she corrects herself. "I would advise you to pay attention. This is regarding your grades, which have always been *perfection*."

I glance at the door, impatiently. Veronica says she'll eat lunch with me today - for once - and I don't want to make her wait. The Heathers might poach her before I even make it to the cafeteria. "You're not holding me back after class just to inflate my ego."

"Recently, your grades have been...at best, subpar."

"So not 'at best' then."

Fleming sighs again and rubs her hands together, thousand bangles jingling along her arms. "You must be greatly affected by this suicide epidemic..."

"Not at all. I've grieved and moved on."

She hums and narrows her eyes, scrutinising me like she's reading scattered knuckle bones. "I see so much of myself in you, JD."

"*Oh?* How so?"

"You and I, we are both too sensitive a soul," she exclaims, clasping her hands to her chest. Her face contorts into one of dramatic wist. "But that is what makes us special. We sense things beyond ourselves. Feel things more than most." She gives me a smile that makes me sick to the stomach. "Dear boy. You might think to escape your sensitivities by hiding behind the words of Charles Baudelaire - yes, I *do* see you, even in the back row - but in time you'll no longer have the ability to hold back the world. It will come calling. And when it does, it will *demand* to be heard."

I stare at her, unable to reconcile this austere woman with the ever-loving-hippie that wafts around the classroom like a happy fart.

"My door is always open, JD. For whatever you wish to talk about. Or not talk about. *I am here for you*. Consider me...*your guiding light*." Lipstick stained teeth peek between her lips, instantly shattering her newfound austerity. "Now - I won't call your father about your grades. Unless this becomes a habit--"

"It won't," I say, quickly. "I'll do better." Bud finds out I'm flunking school, there'll be nothing left of me to 'guide'.

Fleming nods and sweeps an arm towards the door. Her flowing floral sleeve ripples in the air. "Then away with you! Away, away! You mustn't keep your *vrai amour* waiting."

Mystified, and slightly annoyed, I exit the classroom and head towards the cafeteria. I always thought that I was safe in my back corner of the room, but apparently I severely underestimated Fleming. She's a keen observer. Potentially dangerous - if she ever stops trying to rehabilitate me.

I pause when I enter the cafeteria. Cold anger surges at the sight of Veronica sitting with the Heathers. She's already eating her lunch, laughing and chatting animatedly to the mouth-breathers around the table.

Duke seems to have replaced Ram and Kurt with her own mutts - Chad and Brad or whatever the fuck they're called - and they don't look a spit different from their predecessors. The way they leer at Veronica and try to catch a glimpse down her top is also uncannily similar.

I clench my jaw so hard it audibly pops. A pretty lie is a pretty lie. I was a dumbass to think it could ever be anything else. But goddamn if I'm gonna leave her to the fucking dogs.

It's funny, how they all freeze in unison when I stride up to their table. I take the vacant seat beside Veronica, straddling the bench so I'm facing her, and wind an arm around her waist. A peck on the cheek in greeting.

"What took you so long?" she complains, leaning into my embrace. "I thought you stood me up."

"For Fleming? Are you kidding?"

"What did she want?"

"What she always wants," I say, dryly. "*To be my guiding light.*"

Veronica laughs, her dark eyes gleaming at me like I'm the only one here. "How *very*."

"The veriest."

"You *know*, Veronica," Duke cuts in with a tight lipped smile. "I don't think I've ever had a proper conversation with your...beau." She utters the last like it's poison, her upper lip curling in distaste.

Veronica blinks, glancing between Duke and I. "You haven't? But we went bowling the other night-"

"I was a little distracted," Duke hums, bouncing a heeled foot in the air.

"Is that what you call it?" I say in mock bewilderment.

Her glare is piercing, cold. "We find our distractions where we can."

"Sure. But most distractions aren't felonies." Pot kettle, I know, with three felonies under my belt. I'm just too irritated to care.

Duke's smile stretches so wide, it almost breaks past the borders of her perfectly contoured face. "I'm surprised that this is your type, Veronica. Thought you might go for someone less *Unabomber*."

"Well, dang, Heather," I say, slapping my knee. "It looks like you got me all figured out."

Veronica grabs my arm and gives me a cautionary squeeze.

"There's not much to figure," Duke rolls her eyes.

"Go on, then. Grace me with your insight."

Duke crosses her arms and regards me from where she sits on the edge of the table, her legs crossed and slanted. From the pocket of her red skirt, peeks her well-thumbed copy of *Moby Dick*.

"I don't need insight to know that you're a solipsist prick. Nothing and no-one exists outside of your tiny little mind, and it's *pathetic*. We're all just props to you, aren't we?"

I sneer, "*I'm* the egoist? The soil's still fresh on Chandler's grave and you've already raided her wardrobe. Also, I'm pretty sure I'm not the one using people as *furniture*—"

"JD!" Veronica snaps, eyes flashing.

I ignore her, fixed on Duke's contorted features instead. "Chandler barely made two years on the throne. Think you can make it to graduation?" I glance pointedly at McNamara, who's tuned out and picking listlessly at her dry salad. "Enjoy your reign while it lasts. Because trust me - it won't. And I don't need *insight* to know that."

Duke shoots me a narrow glare, eyes roiling and spitting fire, because maybe I got her figured out too.

That night, I wake up screaming so loud I taste blood at the back of my throat. I don't remember the dream, but I know it was about mom.

Bud's too drunk to wake, so I let loose with my madness, fighting the encroaching darkness by shredding every book I can find, because if I don't, I'll have to turn on myself and there's only so much I can take.

The noise in my head doesn't let up until sunrise.

"What the fuck, Benson?" is the first thing that slips out of my mouth when I enter the AV room.

Bentley beams at me, arm wrapped around the shoulders of - that's right, Martha fucking Dunnstock. "My *girlfriend* - yes, yes, I have a girlfriend now - has joined our esteemed ranks—"

"I can see that," I say flatly, glancing at the application form in her hand. "Did he coerce you into joining too, Dunnstock?"

"'Martha'," she says, smiling timidly. "You can—my friends...it's just 'Martha'." There's a nervous titter as she shrugs.

"And what a beautiful name it is," Bentley croons, squeezing Martha into his side.

Her cheeks darken and she lightly taps his stomach with the back of her hand. "Benny... please..."

"I know, it's disgusting," Siouxsie growls from behind the computer. Her kohled eyes are fixed upon the screen, fingers going a mile an hour across the keyboard. "They've been like that ever since they got here. Rain Man, *do something*."

“I think it’s nice,” Charlie hums from the window, an exaggeratedly large joint held aloft between two fingers. Her face is obscured by a cloud of sweet smoke, but I can hear the smile in her dopey voice. “Another romance blooming on the barren grounds of Westerburg. It’s not all death and doom.”

Amir nervously peeps in agreement as he fiddles with the ham radio, his eyes flitting in my direction every so often, like I might snap and destroy *his* romance.

“Yeah, and the antithesis to romance is Rain Man over there.” Siouxsie shoots me a glare over the computer screen. I get the distinct feeling that she’s about to commit homicide with her keyboard if I don’t interject Benny’s sickening affections.

“Actually, Prez, JD’s dating Veronica Sawyer,” Bentley raises, looking a tad offended at everyone’s reactions. He brings Martha over to the centre table and they both take a seat. “If anyone’s a romantic, it’s your beloved Rain Man.”

Siouxsie blinks at me, nose wrinkling in dismay. “A *Heather*? You’re dating a fucking Heather?”

“She’s not a Heather,” I snap, stalking over to the rack of cameras. I pick up the one I used at the game. It’s quickly become my favourite for ease of use and quality of footage—

I pause, turning the camera over in my hands.

...Maybe I’m turning into a Techy after all.

“Veronica just...sits with them at lunch,” I finish, lamely.

“Riiiiight,” Siouxsie drawls. “And how do the Heathers find your relationship? I don’t expect they’re happy with it.”

“Heather Duke and JD got into a fight yesterday,” Bentley offers, unhelpfully.

I flash him a narrow look over my shoulder. “Are you stalking me, Benson?”

“It’s kinda hard to miss the haps at Heathers’ table.” Bentley grins sheepishly and ducks behind Martha’s unicorn folder.

I glance at Martha instead and she, surprisingly, doesn’t retreat like her boyfriend. Instead, she stares back at me steadily, a strange glint in her eyes. I furrow my brows, unsure of what to make of her.

“You better not bring a Heather into the club, Rain Man, or I’ll hang myself with an auxiliary cord.”

“She’s not—” I sigh, exhausted by the simple act of talking.

“Not a Heather. *Fine*. But she’s damn close, isn’t she? Best friends with Chandler before she carked it, so I hear.”

“That’s not true,” Martha interjects. There’s an awkward pause, and then she adds weakly, “I mean. Veronica and I are best friends.”

“Were,” I scoff, and I catch the hurt in Martha’s eyes.

“Don’t be a dick,” Charlie yawns.

Things are tense after that, and the topic of romances and Heathers is dropped in favour of which time travelling vehicle trumps all. The debate gets heated and Charlie slips into the fray to calm everyone down, especially when Amir starts vehemently calling Bentley a *donkey fucking chode*.

I’m chewing on a cigarette and fiddling with an audio recorder, trying to familiarise myself with it before our next assignment - when Martha takes the vacant spot beside me at the window. She leans her head out to catch the passing breeze and says something inane about the weather.

I don’t acknowledge her. Not at first.

“I know you don’t like me,” she says, tentatively.

“I don’t anything you,” I grunt, keeping my focus on the recorder.

Martha hums a nervous laugh and palms the window sill. “I think...we should try to get along. Veronica’s my friend and-and well, I suppose now Bentley is my boyfriend. So...we’ll be seeing each other more often.”

“I don’t-” The rest of my words clog my throat when I see Martha’s imploring face.

She’s just so *painfully normal*, and this - what she’s offering - isn’t this exactly what I’m looking for?

“You’re right,” I say, setting the recorder down. I imitate her smile. “For Veronica.”

“And Bentley.”

“Sure, him too.”

Martha giggles, an anxious air about her despite our truce. “So um...I had a lot of fun the other night. Bowling.”

Oh sweet fucking Jesus, is she trying to make small talk?

“The funnest.”

“I didn’t know you liked bowling. You don’t...well, you don’t really seem the type.”

“Is that right?”

“No-sorry. That was...I mean, you don’t exactly wear Hawaiian shirts and khakis.”

"I would, if I were a braver man."

"I—*you would?*"

"Absolutely," I deadpan.

Martha blinks and smiles. "Benny told me you had a sense of humour. I thought he was pulling my leg."

What is she trying to hide?

"Benson talks about me a lot, does he?"

"Well...yeah, I guess he does," Martha raises a shoulder, smile turned bashful. "You're his best friend. He really looks up to you."

"I'm not exactly Gandhi."

"Gandhi in a trench coat, that's how he describes you," Martha quips, and it takes my muggy brain a second too long to realise it's a joke.

The corner of my mouth twitches. Maybe that was a little funny.

Bentley hears Martha laughing and he starts to rage, "JD! You better not be flirting with my Patsypoo!" to which Siouxie retches over her keyboard.

When the club disperses for the day, Martha catches me at the door and holds out a folded piece of paper. "Can you pass this onto Veronica?" she asks, timidly.

I raise a brow. "Give it to her yourself."

"I would, but she's so hard to catch these days. You're always with her, right? JD, please? A favour for a friend?" Martha implores, trying to grasp my arm.

I flinch away from her touch and quickly slip past her - but not before snatching the note from her hand. "Fine," I mutter, "a favour for a friend."

When I step out into the hallway, I see a calculating look on Martha's face. An ill-fitted expression for someone who's so...well, *Martha*.

Uneasiness swells. I make sure I'm out of sight before I unfold the note to read.

The Princess Bride next weekend? :) Call me! - M

Without hesitation, I crumple the note into a tight ball and toss it into the nearest trash can.

Mom's death anniversary comes and goes without fanfare, and barely an acknowledgement from her deadbeat husband, who spends the day in a drunken stupor in front of the television.

I skip school and lock myself in my room, unable to fathom being around other people, even Veronica. I while away those slow hours taping my destroyed books together and drinking beers I pilfered from Bud's cooler. It's not enough to forget mom, but enough to make her memory bearable.

For once, my night isn't laden with dreams of Alswell or mom raining down in infinitesimal chunks, but only because sleep eludes me. So I slip out the window and go for a ride to outrun my shadow. It's impossible. It's stupid. But I try anyway. It beats pacing my dinghy room and listening to Bud's muffled snores.

Sherwood is dead at 3am but it feels crowded like I'm riding through three states of time. I shove my helmet on - it keeps most of the noise out - and I'm driving near blind, swerving down the main road with my head in a fucking spin. There's the intersection with red lights blaring at me and I don't stop, I don't *want* to stop. I whip past into the nothingness beyond, red lights splashed across the tarmac in a gory swell, and I'm speeding, pushing my bike to the very limit like I'm trying to escape my own skin but *I can't*, and I'm heaving and splitting and rending ten ways because *oh god oh god I fucking shot them in the head*—

I come to in the gutter, blinking out smashed visor and feeling numbnurnbnumb.

The noise is gone. It's quiet. I try to breathe, but it's like I have a taut band across my chest, so I take shallow sips of air, savouring the peace for as long as I've got it.

When I finally drag myself upright, I can see the familiar gothic gates of the cemetery. The bike - *fuck, it's totalled* - lies in front of the gate, black bars bent askew from the impact.

I don't register the pain until I stand the wrecked bike to inspect the damage, and it hits me like a sledgehammer, knocking the wind out of me. I sag over the handlebars, gritting my teeth, but I have to go, *I have to move*, because some asshole is gonna call the cops and then I'll be on their radar, watched and suspected.

So with great effort, I push the bike onto the road and start the long trek back into town, trying to forget what I saw on the other side of those bent bars. Two restless figures, watching me from the thick of the trees.

On Friday, I have to take the bus to school and every judder and jolt sends a sickening throb through every inch of my body. At least I don't have any broken bones and after a thorough inspection, I can say that I escaped my early morning accident with only bruising and maybe a mild concussion. An optimist might think me the luckiest sonuvabitch in the Midwest. Knowing what caused the crash in the first place - I'm not feeling so positive.

I hobble through the crowded halls, grateful that most people are giving me a wide berth. The jocks aren't as merciful, their shoulders like brick walls as they slam into me, but so far it's

only Duke's mutts who seem to have it out for me - the rest just call me the usual derogatory, homophobic slurs before moving on.

It's almost time for homeroom when I finally reach Veronica's locker. She's chatting with Martha as she organises her books, and the latter balks when she sees me approaching.

"Hey, Mr. Badass," Veronica smiles, closing her locker and leaning against it. She hugs her books to her chest. "I was wondering where you were."

"H-Hi JD!" Martha stammers with a strained smile. "I'll catch you later, Veronica." And like that, she's gone, zipping down the hallway like she's got a race to win.

I narrow my eyes at her retreating form, instantly full of suspicion.

"JD?" Veronica's voice, hushed and concerned, draws me back. She reaches up and carefully touches my grazed jaw, dark eyes flitting over every scrape and bruise on my face. I stare down at her, eyelids heavy, unable to bring myself to say anything.

"What happened?" Her brows pinch together as she grasps the front of my coat. "Was it... was it your dad?"

I shake my head and the sudden motion makes my head spin. "No," I say, hoarsely. "Crashed my bike."

"Crashed your—" Her eyes flinch wide in alarm and she holds me at arms length, sweeping her panicked gaze over me. "*Jesus*, are you okay? Have you been to the hospital?"

"I'm fine," I say, managing a weak smile. I grab the wing of her blue blazer and tug her into my arms, stifling a wince when her body collides with mine. I hug her close, push my face into the mass of shampoo-scented curls. Every inhale of her draws the tension out of me like a hit of morphine. "I feel better already."

Veronica tenses for a moment as though wanting to protest, but she eventually relaxes and melts in my arms. She tilts her head to peck my jaw, mindful of the gnarly scrape. "You're a dick," she grumbles, and she handles me so gently like I could shatter. "*God*, JD. You might be Mr. Badass, but you're not invincible."

"I know, I know. I'm sorry." I press a soft kiss on her forehead before we part. "What did Dunnstock want?"

Veronica seems to want to continue her lecture on safety, but one look at my expression changes her mind. She sighs and winds her arm around mine, and we slowly make our way to homeroom together.

"Martha invited me to a sleepover this Saturday," she says, perking up. "We're gonna watch *The Princess Bride* on repeat and eat what Heather Duke calls 'nuclear waste'." She sees the look on my face and laughs, adding, "It's fun, trust me. Martha's a real laugh if you get to know her."

Martha *fucking* Dunnstock.

I clench my jaw to keep the vitriol from surging out. Anger jabs at my guts like daggers, drawing blood with every strike. She's trying to keep us apart, keep Veronica for herself, because she knows that when Veronica's with me, *Martha Dunnstock* is just a name in the yearbook. A fond but insubstantial memory.

"JD? What's wrong?" Veronica draws me off to the side and the crowd of students continues to current past, unfettered.

"Nothing, it's nothing..." I lean against the wall, sliding my hand down to grasp hers. "I'm just disappointed."

"Really?" Her brows shoot up. "I didn't think you'd like *The Princess Bride*—"

"I wanted to have our first date on Saturday night," I lie. "I already bought two tickets to *Dead Poets Society* - you've been talking about seeing it all week - and I was going to surprise you."

Veronica bites her lip, conflicted. "Shit. I—*damn*. You bought the tickets already?"

"I thought you'd want to go," I say, flatly.

She exhales and bops her forehead against my chest. "I'm sorry, JD. I owe you a proper date too."

"Don't make it two, Sawyer. I charge interest."

"But *Martha*." Veronica raises her face with pursed lips. "I've been *such* a shitty friend lately. I don't feel good about cancelling—"

"You can postpone." I cup her cheek in one hand and she leans into my touch, flushing a pretty pink. "This is our *first date*. Do you know how monumental that is? It's bigger than the goddamn Declaration of Independence. It's history defining. Don't blow me off, baby."

She tilts her head and kisses my palm. "I'm a bad friend."

"A terrible friend," I affirm, smirking. "But the best girlfriend." I kiss her deeply, heatedly, ignoring the lance of pain from my cut lip. I feel her bending like a reed under my ministrations and she returns eagerly, pressing me flush against the wall as she takes control.

It's the bell that breaks us apart, and when we do, we're breathless and flushed and simmering hot. "It better be the *perfect* first date," she says, and we continue down the hall, hand in hand, and I'm feeling pretty damn optimistic.

My newfound optimism doesn't last long. Until the afternoon, to be precise - the moment I step into the AV room and see Martha Dunnstock hovering awkwardly around Bentley as he tries to explain how a camera works.

Martha stiffens and stares at me as I limp towards the window for a smoke. Judging by the intensity of her glare, Veronica has already cancelled on her. I smile and give her a jaunty wave, before turning my back on her.

The endless blue of the sky is offensive and dizzying. I lean against the window sill as I light my cigarette. Whatever's about to happen, I don't think I'm prepared for it.

"Patsypoo, are you listening? You need to know how to operate this for assembly—"

"Just a minute, Bennyboo. I'll be right back."

As expected, Martha sidles up to me with a nervous smile. Behind us, Bentley grumbles to himself as he's yet again ditched by his girlfriend for his 'best friend'.

"What happened?" she asks, indicating my face.

"Nothing," I say, flatly.

"It doesn't look like nothing."

"What do you want, Dunnstock?"

Martha slaps her palms on the sill, drumming an anxious beat. "Veronica told me about your date tomorrow."

"Did she now," I grunt.

"Yeah. Which is, you know, a bit of a coincidence. Because that's when we were supposed to have our sleepover."

"Wow. What a coincidence."

"Do you really have the tickets?" She peers up at me, scrutinising my impassive face. "You wouldn't *lie* to her, would you?"

"What's it to you?" I say, curtly.

"Nothing. It's just...a coincidence, I guess." Martha pauses, her eyes fixed upon my profile. It's making me uneasy, her relentless stare, and I'm not sure what her intent is. Is she trying to wig me out? Or is she really that upset about being cancelled on?

And then, she breaks the terse silence with, "I saw you throw away my note."

"What note?"

"Favour for a friend?"

"I misplaced it."

"You threw it in the trash."

"Like I said."

"Do you spend every weekend with Veronica?"

"Not every weekend."

"Friday nights must be a Veronica night, right?"

"...Sure."

"Especially since you don't work your dad's sites anymore."

A chill runs down my spine. "How did you know about that?" I shoot her a narrow glare of my own.

She smiles and shrugs. "I'm not sure. Veronica?"

Bullshit.

Outside, cheers erupt on the field where the Rottweilers are training. Martha and I both glance out the window and watch their tiny figures race around the green like an incohesive colony of red ants.

"You don't get along with the jocks," Martha states, casually.

"An astute observation, Nancy Drew."

"You got into a fight with Ram and Kurt. I saw it, I was there."

Martha turns her intense stare back onto me, inching close. I try to step back, to widen the ever-shrinking gap, but I hit the junk laden counter instead. I'm trapped.

"The night Ram and Kurt died - that was a Friday, wasn't it? Were you with Veronica?"

Ah shit. Shitshitshit.

Clarity hits in a sickening lurch. I stare at her, hand shaking as it holds my forgotten smoke aloft, the distant cheers and shouts from the field buzzing in my ears. "What...what is this? An interrogation?"

Martha's a mere foot away. Her eyes are emblazoned, accusatory, and even though I tower over her, she swells with a power that I'm not privy to. "What do you think this is?"

"I don't—" I falter, heart pounding a mile a second.

She smiles, and it's cruel and twisted and nothing like a smile at all. "*I know, JD,*" she whispers. "*I know what you did.*" But then she's saying something else - or says it at the same time - and I can't be sure if she really said what she just said—

"I'm just trying to make conversation," Martha says, bewildered. "We made a deal. To try and be friends?"

And the words garble, morph into something else, accusatory, cruel, "*It's no wonder your mom left you. I would too if I had a murdering piece of shit for a son.*"

"I practically grew up with Ram, you know. We were pretty much in the same class from kindergarten to high school. Isn't that wild?"

"*Your revolution will die with you. And Veronica won't even remember your name by graduation.*"

"He was always so happy. I never thought he could--well, I guess you never know..."

"*You're already dead. Six feet underground, eating dirt with everyone you've killed. You're nothingnothingnothing--*"

I bring my hands to my eyes, grinding in the heel of my palms. Stars erupt, paint the pitch white. I feel sick. Wrong. Like I'm inside out and upside down, and everything around me isn't as it should be.

Martha's babbling about Ram and how he was her kindergarten boyfriend, like any of it matters, and I know, *I know* she knows, but she's acting like she doesn't and the ground's crumbling away from under my feet.

"*Stop,*" I mutter, gripping the edge of the counter behind me. "Just stop - whatever you're doing, it's--"

"I'm not doing anything," Martha says, frowning. "JD, are you okay...?" She reaches out to me and I slap her hand aside, panic morphing into unadulterated *rage*.

"*Don't touch me,*" I snarl, and she rears back, clutching her aching hand, eyes bulging in shock. "I know what you're doing, Dunnstock. *I know your game.* That's why you're playing house with Benson. You're trying to get to *me*--"

"What? No! I-I like Benny. I really do!" Now *she's* edging away from *me*, like I've suddenly turned rabid, and maybe I have and maybe she should because all semblance of control is slipping out of my grasp.

I lurch close and she stares up at me, feigning terror, but I can see the hatred simmering just beneath the surface.

You're a terrible actor, Dunnstock.

I bare my teeth and hiss, "You think you have everyone fooled with your innocent unicorn-obsessed schtick, but I *know* who you are. *I can see right through your bullshit.*"

"Please, I don't—I don't know what you're talking about—" Her voice trembles and tears spring to her eyes, but I don't buy it, *I can't*, because this *parasite* just tried to threaten me using Veronica, using *our revolution*—

"Get away from her, JD!" Before I can react, Bentley grabs my arm and wrenches me away from Martha.

I glare at him, seething. "You're an idiot, Benson. You're being *played*."

Bentley puffs out his chest and holds his arms akimbo, trying to appear threatening even while he shines with nervous sweat. "I don't know what's got you so riled up, but you can't talk to her like that--"

"I'm doing you a favour," I bark, jabbing his chest. He holds his own, chin raised, weathering the worst of my rage as it focuses on him. "She's acting, can't you see it? She didn't even *know* you existed until two weeks ago. Isn't that around the time Ram Sweeney shot himself in the head? Funny, the timing."

Bentley blanches at my words, but after glancing at Martha, who's quietly crying in the corner, he doubles down on his 'heroics'. "She's not acting. It might be hard for you to believe, but she actually does like me. And-and I like her too! Now, you might be jealous because you're having problems with Veronica--"

"*Jealous?*" I laugh, wild and careening. "Open your eyes, Benson! She's using you to get to me!"

Bentley frowns, confused. "You think she likes you?"

"No, you *stupid fuck*, she--" I cut myself short, realising just how close I was to ruining everything.

Frustration mounts, erupts. "It doesn't matter," I snarl, shoving him aside. "I'm done with this."

"The world doesn't revolve around you, JD," Bentley scowls, shoving me right back. I stumble into the table, not expecting his retaliation. "Whatever you're going through, it gives you no right to take it out on Martha. She's done *nothing* to you!"

"*She's trying to take everything from me!*" I yell, mad and untethered. "Everything! And if she wins, I'll have nothing left. *Nothing*, Bentley. Do you know what that is? What that's *like?*"

"You're *wrong*, JD. She just wants to be friends--"

"*Friends?* Like she's your *girlfriend?*" I sneer. "She's a conniving *bitch* who'll suck you dry after she's done with me."

He grabs my collar, all fury and fire. There's nothing of the coke-bottle nerd from the bathroom, choking on cigarette smoke. "*Don't talk about her like that!*" he rages, shaking me like a ragdoll. "Can't you be happy for me? I've finally found someone who likes me for me and here you are, trying to ruin the one good thing in my life! I'm starting to think that maybe Heather Duke was right about you. You're *selfish*, JD. Maybe we *are* just props to you, because you don't treat us like people, even when we try so hard to be your friend--"

I gnash my teeth, on the edge of hysteria. "*That's because you **are** a prop, you fucking nix!*"

Bentley recoils, blinking at me with wide, red-rimmed eyes.

“THAT’S ENOUGH!” Siouxsie bellows, yanking us apart. She slaps us both with the tips of her fingers, leaving a sting on our cheeks. “You bitches need to *calm the fuck down* and take this somewhere else! I won’t have you sully my sanctuary with your stupid white boy drama.”

Bentley glares daggers at me, heaving, itching to resume our fight. But the noise in my head is unbearable, threatening to spill over into violence or something worse.

I push myself from the table and stumble out the door. In the heavy silence I leave behind, Martha giggles, and I’m sure I’m the only one who hears it.

Chapter End Notes

So much toxicity! Yay! :D

I would like to remind you of the 'Unreliable Narrator' tag for this fic. Whatever JD states has happened may or may not have happened. And whatever **has** happened, might not be the truth of the situation. His perception is especially skewed in this chapter because of his deteriorating mental health, and it will probably get worse from here on out.

On a happier note, I think this is my longest chapter yet at almost 6k words! I hope it's not too awkward or weird to read. Please let me know your thoughts :) <3

Chapter 18: ghosts

Chapter Summary

a question of guilt, a game of croquet, and a haunting.

Chapter Notes

CW: Explicit language, emesis, hallucinations, mentions of insomnia, mentions of child abuse/physical abuse, panic attack, mentions of s*icide, self-harm.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The problem with lies is that at some point, they always catch up with you.

“JD?”

I fiddle with the fifty dollar note I swiped from Bud’s wallet while he was on the shitter, trying to think of a good excuse as to why I don’t have the tickets I’d promised Veronica. Well, since I don’t have a dog, I’m just grasping at straws.

“JD, did you forget the tickets?”

And sometimes, the problem just solves itself.

“Sure,” I say, offering her the fifty. She blinks and takes it from me. “Left them on my desk like an idiot.”

Veronica furrows her brows, glancing from the fifty in her hand to my face, and whatever she sees there seems to make her uneasy. “Right,” she says, flatly. “Well. This should cover it.” Her dark eyes linger on me for a beat too long, and then she heads to the ticket booth without another word.

I think her reaction would have bothered me more if I wasn’t so exhausted. I sag against a poster for *Ghost Busters II* and rub my bleary eyes, the start of a headache throbbing at the base of my skull.

It’s sufficiently crowded tonight at the Limelight Theatre, kids from Westerborg High mix and mingle within their couplings and friendship groups. It’s a bit disorientating, their bright faces and laughter, and I recall Veronica talking about feeling lacklustre.

They just hide it better. They don brands and forge bonds, but it's all transactional - their smiles, their stability, accessories to distract from the desperation that lurks beneath the lurid disguise. Bentley reckons I see people as props, but that's what we are to each other, isn't it? Props, things, to use in lieu of whatever we're lacking. And really, it's all up for grabs, flesh and soul, nothing's gone to waste.

Veronica slaps the tickets against my chest. She wears the kind of expression that I'm probably wearing, only she's looking at me. "We don't have to be here if you don't want to, JD," she says, quietly.

I take the tickets, suddenly wary. "It's our first date."

"Our first date is a convenient excuse." Her crooked smile is wry. A tad arch. She reaches out to grasp my hand, and I return the gesture, slipping my fingers through hers. "I'm not going to leave you. I promised, didn't I?"

I stare at her, perplexed. "I know."

"No, I don't think you do." She sighs and rises on her toes to kiss me. "Just don't lie to me again, okay? We can't work if you keep lying."

"I'm not lying," I say, taking the kiss with an impassive face.

Veronica gazes at me with her deep, dark eyes, and I know that she's got me figured in ways that Heather Duke thinks she does. She shakes her sleeve and checks the watch on her wrist. "This isn't a free pass," she says, pulling me along to the theatre. "We're not done talking about this."

We sit at the back of the almost-packed theatre, hands intertwined even when the movie starts. I don't pay much attention to it - not really a movie guy - so I watch Veronica watch instead. And it's worth more than a hundred tickets to see all the subtle shifts in her face. The startled quivering of her long lashes. The little dips in her cheeks whenever she grimaces. The small sighs and pinched brows, of which there are a lot. And during the more comedic scenes, the brightness in her eyes and the glint of teeth peeking out of her dazzling smile. Expressions are complex already, but Veronica's are damn Byzantine.

Near the end of the film, Veronica starts getting restless and she leans her head on my shoulder. "JD," she murmurs, "do you think I'm a good person?"

"You're better than good," I murmur back, kissing the top of her head.

"I keep thinking about...everything. And how I'm able to just...keep going. Like none of it ever happened."

Are we really going to talk about this *now*? "You're popping pills, aren't you? That's a sure sign of a guilty conscience."

"JD, I'm serious." She raises her head to lock eyes with me, and yeah, she is serious.

Irritation flares. “You’re questioning yourself because you’re not - what - throwing hysterics? Things aren’t so black and white, Veronica.”

“Maybe Todd has the right idea. I dunno.”

“A movie about pampered trust fund kids isn't the most apt reference for your ethical dilemma.”

She raises a brow. “And you are?”

"I'm not as morally bankrupt as you think."

"JD, you killed three of our classmates—"

"*Keep your voice down*," I hiss, glancing at the row in front of us. No-one seems to be paying us any mind. I let out a sharp breath and bring my mouth to her ear, whispering, "I'm not that guy anymore. I've changed. I'm doing the whole 'normal' thing now - that practically makes me *Jesus*."

Veronica purses her lips. “You say you've changed, but you *lied* to me.”

“Are you still sore about that? Look, I don’t trust Dunnstock. I don’t think her invitation was the olive branch you think it is.”

“What are you talking about?”

“She knows.”

“*What?*” Veronica gasps, sitting upright. Even in the gloom of the theatre, I can see her blanch a few shades lighter. “Did she say something?”

“Not exactly. But I know she suspects that Ram didn’t kill himself.”

“Oh. Oh, *no*, you got it all wrong.” I can hear the relief in her voice. “That’s because she *liked* him—”

“Yeah, I heard the epic. It’s a real tearjerker. You have to be careful, Veronica. Don’t take her at face value.”

When I glance back at her, she’s wearing a crooked smile. In her mind, the crisis is already averted. Sometimes, I wonder if I give her too much credit.

“Have you ever considered taking your own advice sometimes?” she says.

“Veronica—”

“*Relax*, JD. Martha isn’t going to send us to San Quentin. She just wanted to hang out - like what *normal* kids do on a *normal* Saturday night. You do remember normal, don’t you?”

“You’re beautiful,” I say, dryly.

“Aren't I just?”

And then we smile, really smile, and for the rest of the movie, I can almost pretend that I believe her.

After the movie, we head back to Veronica's for a round of croquet. Again, not really my idea of a good time, but I don't want to leave her side, lest she's tempted to sleepover at Martha's after all. And by the way she drives home in a terse silence, shooting perplexed glances at me at every red light, we need to finish our bookmarked conversation.

The Sawyer's backyard can hardly be called as such. It's more like a sprawling botanical garden with a buzzed field just for croquet. The fountain glows an eerie blue that casts enough light for us to see as we set up the game. She grabs a blue croquet mallet and I make a blind grab for mine. Green.

“Why don't you take the black mallet?” Veronica suggests, holding it out to me.

I swing the green mallet over my shoulder. “This one's fine. Are you gonna tell me how this plays out?”

“Well, you take the black and blue balls, and I'll take the red and yellow—”

“I mean Dunnstock. What are we going to do about her?”

Veronica purses her lips. “Nothing. There's nothing we need to do.”

“Veronica, she knows that Ram didn't kill himself—”

She hits the red ball through the first hoop. Clean. Easy. “Is that why you lied to me about the tickets?”

“Jesus Christ, Sawyer.”

“I get another shot,” she says, stalking to the first hoop to hit the red ball again. “No, I think you lied because you don't want me around Martha. You don't want me around anyone else but you.” The ball rolls through the second hoop.

“Is that so bad?” I say caustically, striking the blue ball toward the first hoop. It goes wide and disappears into a bush. “I want to be with you, Veronica. And I can't do that if you're always with the Heathers or Dunnstock or whoever the fuck you call a 'friend'.”

I drop my mallet and grab her by the waist, reeling her into my arms. She shoves her mallet against my chest, barring full contact. Her eyes flash a cold blue - frigid like Chandler's.

“Wouldn't you rather be here with me?” I say, smirking. “Or do you really wanna play Polly Pocket with Martha Dunnstock?”

Veronica huffs. “At least she's not a jerk.”

“Come on, baby,” I wheedle, slipping a palm around her nape. She stills, tenses, like she’s about to crack my skull with her mallet. “You’re my everything. And I don’t want to share my everything. Not with anyone.” I swoop in and capture her lips in a kiss, deep and slow and tender, and I can feel the tension draining out of her. We part an inch, enough room for a warm smile.

“Selfish prick,” she growls, and then kisses me back angrily, throwing the mallet to the grass.

We don’t get much croquet in after that. At one point, between frenzied, heated kisses, we end up by the fountain, under a moulting tree. Veronica plants herself in my lap, arms ringing my neck as we lose ourselves in each other. And then, finally, we come up for air with kiss-bruised lips and dishevelled hair.

“Don’t worry about Martha,” she says breathlessly, slipping her hand under my collar. Her fingers burn my skin. “I have it under control.”

I gaze down at her hooded eyes and long, sticky lashes. The cool artificial wash marbles her skin, turns her jade. She looks otherworldly. “I trust you.”

Veronica glances up at me with a gentle smile. “Thank you. And ease up on the jealous boyfriend act, okay? I can’t be the only person in your life - and you can’t be the only one in mine. That’s not how people work.”

But we’re not people, I want to say.

Instead, I ask, “Is that why you and McNamara have been getting so cosy?”

She glances away, cheeks flushed pink.

My stomach clenches in a way that makes me want to vomit. “I’m curious, what do you talk to her about that you don’t with me?”

“What did I just say about acting like a jealous asshole?”

“I’m not allowed to take interest in your social life?”

“Do you ever stop with the bullshit?” Veronica snaps. She grabs my face in both hands and locks eyes with mine. Hers are fierce. “JD, what is going on? Ever since the cemetery, you’ve been so *mad*.” She pauses, biting her lower lip. “And when you think no-one can see you - you look scared. Terrified, even. But you never say *anything*—”

“If anyone’s bullshitting, Sawyer, *it’s you*.”

She frowns. “What are you talking about?”

“You’re so desperate to appease your conscience, you’d play-pretend normalcy,” I sneer, trapping her in a steel cage of my arms. She grits her teeth and strains against my chest, but I tighten my hold. “You’re too scared to admit that you’re not the lily-white pacifist you

pretend to be, and baby, believe you me, pacifists don't make it in this world. If they did, we wouldn't have had to pull the goddamn trigger."

Veronica glares up at me, pale and quivering with quiet anger. "We didn't pull the trigger," she whispers. "*You* did."

"You're as culpable as I am, darling."

"And you're as scared as I am." Deep shadows accentuate her features, turn them to jagged glass. "You're scared and sick with so much guilt, you can't sleep. Think I haven't noticed how tired you've been? I'd offer you some pills, but I'm all out." Her smile is sharp enough to cut. "You're not invincible. You're flesh and blood, like the rest of us, and that's *okay*. Do you remember when you told me about your mom? You cried, JD. Like a regular human being with a heart. And you couldn't look me in the eyes for the rest of the night - it was like you put up more walls than you let down. Like you were running away from me. But JD, you don't have to be alone in this. You don't have to keep these walls up all the time. This isn't a war."

"I don't regret what I did," I say, impassively. "I don't regret our revolution. But I gave all that up - *for you*. All the good we could have done. All the people we could have saved. *Gone*." I rip up a handful of grass and toss it in the air, the shredded pieces dissipating on a passing breeze. "If there's anything to feel guilty about. It's that."

Veronica slides off my lap and rises to her feet, grimace tighter than her stance. "I wish you'd talk to me," she says, quietly.

"I *am* talking to you."

"No. You're not."

"What do you want me to say, Veronica? *Hm?* That I'm sorry? That I can't sleep? That I get beaten just for breathing? Or do you want me to tell you that you were right - that I'm *exactly* the kind of monster you think I am?" I laugh caustically, and it comes out a bit too pitchy, a bit too wild.

"I don't want you to say anything," she says, heatedly. "I just want you to be *honest*—"

"Your brand of honesty is marketing. It's a vapid utopia that only exists in Dunnstock's fantasies, along with unicorns and a decent Ram Sweeney." I clamber to my feet and lose my balance. My back hits the tree. I'm breathless. "What you want doesn't exist, Veronica. And *you know that*. If you need this...inertia, to survive, then *fine*. I won't take that away from you. In fact, I'll play right along, like I have been for the past two weeks. Just don't expect me to give you any more than that."

She gazes at me in silent scrutiny, dark wells for eyes threatening to swallow me whole. Her hand seeks out my chest. Feels my pulse. "Your heart's racing," she informs me. "You're breathing too fast."

Digging my nails into my arms, I force my breath to slow and deepen. She keeps her palm on my chest as if to steady me, and waits patiently until my heart's beating at a calmer pace.

"You didn't even notice, did you?" Veronica gives me a smile, one dripping with condescension. "I see you, JD. Maybe more than you ever could." There's more she wants to say; *could* say, but she doesn't. She just pecks my jaw and heads into the house, leaving me with an unfinished game of croquet and her lingering warmth.

Like so, our first date ends.

After midnight, Veronica slips out of her window and shimmies down the pipe. She's not changed yet, but her clothes are crumpled like she'd been trying to sleep. I follow her from a distance as she lights a cigarette and walks down the road, oblivious to her shadow.

I couldn't go home after our failed croquet game, so I sat on the pavement across from her house, smoking and thinking and staring at the dark windows. Hours passed like this, but it could have been only twenty minutes for all I know.

Veronica takes me to the cemetery, and a part of me isn't surprised. I suppose both of us are drawn to the scene of our crime - but for very different reasons. She pauses at the gates when she sees the bent bars, head tilted like she's trying to figure out what happened, and then she climbs over with agile ease and disappears into the darkness.

I give it a minute before I follow suit, climbing over and dropping down on the other side as quietly as I can. Almost instantly, a clammy chill sinks deep into my flesh. The hairs on my nape rise. I skittishly glance around the dark treeline on either side, expecting to see—

*See what? **Ghosts?***

I take a stabilising breath and continue on up the long, winding driveway. I don't need to see Veronica to know exactly where she's going.

Ram, Kurt, and Heather were buried side by side - something to do with them being 'friends in life and death', a sentiment held by their parents (who clearly knew *nothing* about their kids). I can imagine Chandler throwing a tantrum that she didn't get her own plot, complete with a marble statue and a water feature.

I hover back in the treeline, watching Veronica as she kneels in the dirt and pulls the weeds growing on the graves. Even from this distance, I can hear her voice, soft and fragile, almost lost to the susurrating trees.

"--haven't visited until now," she's saying, gathering the weeds in a neat pile to the side. "Things have been really crazy. With school and JD and—" She cuts herself short and sits on her legs. There's a long silence, during which she stares at the three headstones in turn, as though she's trying to burn them into her memory. And then her speech starts up again, "I really don't have an excuse. If it wasn't for me, you wouldn't be here. None of you deserved

this. You were just *seventeen*, with a whole future ahead of you. And now you...you don't. Because I stole it from you."

Veronica lowers her head. Her shoulders quake, like she's laughing—

No, she's *crying*. Soft sobs echo across the silent graveyard, and for a wild moment, I think I can hear other voices, crying along with her.

"*I'm sorry*," Veronica sobs, digging her hands into the dirt. "*I'm sorry, god I'm so sorry.*"

I press my back against the tree, trying to steady my shaky breaths. Anger stabs at me like a thousand white hot needles, and I have to claw at the trunk to keep from doing anything rash.

"I fucked up. I really fucked up. And now I see you everywhere. In my dreams, in my room, at school, even at JD's, you're there. I don't know if you're haunting me or-or if I'm going crazy." Veronica sniffs and wipes her eyes with her sleeve, and she just looks so damn miserable. My anger buckles. Weakens. And I think of holding her, kissing the tears from her face--

Then I remember why she's crying and resentment surges anew.

"I can't function. I can't sleep without pills and even then, it's not enough. And every time I smile or laugh or even feel anything remotely positive, you're there to remind me of what I did. JD tells me I should move on, but I don't *want to*." She brushes dirt from Chandler's headstone, in an almost tender manner. "I know. It's sick that I'm still with him. But I can't help it. *I love him*. And I'm too weak to leave him. Maybe..." Her breath stutters and her hand curls into a tight fist. "Maybe I *deserve* to be with him."

McNamara's voice comes unbidden, a disembodied voice in the dark. *Sometimes we stay with people who aren't good for us, because they aren't good for us.*

I don't stay to hear the rest of Veronica's pathetic, hand-wringing speech. I stumble back into the brume of the night, Veronica's words looping incessantly in my head. *I deserve to be with him I deserve to be with him I deserve to be with him I deserve to be with him—*

This isn't Veronica. Whoever this person is, it's not the girl who gleefully held a loaded gun to my throat. It's not the girl who rode with me to nowhere and incited revolution four thousand feet above the world. She isn't Veronica Sawyer - but the milquetoast Midwest town that stripped away her potential, her strength, and her name. She is her worst fear come true, and she doesn't even know it.

And worst yet, I'm not her everything, like she is mine. Dunnstock, McNamara, Duke, even goddamn *ghosts* have claim to her - and I am barely a consideration. No, according to her, I'm *punishment*.

The nausea finally wins and I empty my stomach in front of the gate, gripping the bent bars with clammy hands. My legs are too shaky to climb, so I sit under a tree for a few minutes, spitting bile from my burning mouth.

Normalcy didn't work. Veronica's further away than she's ever been, consumed with guilt and ghosts. And she demands the kind of honesty I can't provide - how could I, when it's the very thing that'll end us and our revolution? She wants to be Sherwood, a town that's doomed to be collateral, and expects me to hold her hand and blow ourselves up in pointless self-destruction. And what for? What good will that do? We'll just be another statistic in the ever-deteriorating clusterfuck of a world, and our chance to make actual history will be wasted.

I wipe my mouth, staring into the pitch, expecting my own ghosts to step out of the shadows. But none do. I rise to my feet and grab the bars, turning my back to the dead. Before me, the long stretch of road heading back into town, and the distant hum of neon green from the 7-Eleven. A fresh determination rears its head. If Veronica Sawyer won't take back her name, then I'll have to take it for her.

Chapter End Notes

This isn't as long as I'd wanted it to be - but I wanted to move on to the drama in the next chapter c:

I think Veronica's starting to see just how terrible JD is for her - his suffocating possessiveness, his anger, his lies and manipulation - there's only so much she can overlook. But she stays with him for many reasons, one of which is that she feels undeserving of being free from his abuse, self-flagellation of sorts. She also feels responsible for this monster she created, and she knows that if she leaves him, other people could get hurt in the fallout. And another reason, this one is possibly the strongest of them all, is that she thinks he can be saved. She sees glimpses of the person he could be beneath all that poison and rage, and she loves that person. A part of her still believes that he's not beyond redemption and she's reluctant to abandon him like his mom did.

It's easy to criticise Veronica, I think, for her way of thinking - but I know first hand what it's like to love a toxic person, and it's really like a sickness you can't shake, no matter how much you try to rationalise.

Just to be clear - this isn't a redemption fic. JD's going to die no matter what and I don't think how he dies cancels out his destructive actions. It's the very least of what he owes.

Chapter 19: shine

Chapter Summary

lasagne, a betrayal, and patronised bunny rabbits.

Chapter Notes

CW: Explicit language, alcohol abuse/addiction, physical & verbal abuse, s*icidality, s*icide attempt, drug use.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“How’s she looking?”

I sit back on my haunches, wiping my hands with an oil-streaked cloth. “No cracks in the radiator, as far as I can tell.” I peer up at Hudson, who wears a halo of sunlight. “It’ll ride again. What do you want?”

Hudson sets down a heavy grocery bag and crouches down beside me, inspecting my handiwork. “I wanted to check in on you and your old man.” He picks up a panel and flips it idly between his hands. “It’s been a while since any of the guys heard from Bud, so we were getting worried.”

“He’s pissed, what do you expect?” I say, snatching the panel from his hands. “He’ll stumble in once he sobers up. Same as he does every year.”

Hudson gives me a half-smile and rubs his hands, awkwardly. “How are you doing? We haven’t talked in—”

“If that’s all, then you can go.” I glance at the bag. A furtive sniff tells me it’s food. “...Leave the bag.”

“Lasagne,” he says, nudging the bag towards me. “With extra garlicky garlic bread. I made it myself.”

I blink at the guy. “You cook?”

“Sure,” he grins. “If I don’t, then I’ll be stuck eating shitty TV dinners like you and your old man. When are you boys ever gonna learn, huh?”

I set down my wrench and peer into the bag. It's big enough to feed ten and smells fucking delicious. "Looks good," I say, begrudgingly.

"Better than good. It's my nonna's recipe. True Italian fare, Dino." He pronounces it *eye-telyun* in his Jersey drawl.

I chuck the cloth at his head. He catches it without blinking. "You almost done with the hotel?"

"Almost," Hudson chuckles. He folds the cloth into a neat square and sets it down next to Bud's toolbox. "Once this is done, we got one more job lined up. An office block just outside of town. Reckon we'll bounce after that."

"How long?"

"Two or three weeks, give or take."

I nod, wiping the sweat from my face with the back of my hand. That's how long I have left in Sherwood. Three weeks. Not even a goddamn month.

"I bet you're itching to get outta this place, huh?" Hudson says, noting my silence. He goes to nudge me with his fist - but then remembers himself and drops his hand. "Or maybe you're wanting to stay a bit longer. Bud says you got yourself a girl."

Hudson's eyes are arctic-light, striking with his dark complexion. His black hair flops into them every time he moves his head, and he blows or swipes at it impatiently. But the thing that has me lingering, is the incessant smile hooking the corner of his lips, like he's always thinking of a joke only he understands.

Every time we go to a seedy roadside bar or for burgers after work, Hudson goes home with at least one phone number scrawled on a napkin. I give him shit for it, especially since he's sworn off relationships, but he keeps each and every number in a shoebox. Proof for his future grandkids that 'Grandpa Huddy pulled', or so he says.

He does have a way of making you feel at ease. Like it doesn't matter what you've done or where've you been, as long as you have a smoke and a drink to share. Things are easy with Hudson. Uncomplicated.

"Her name's Veronica," I say, pulling out a pack of smokes and offering him one. He takes it with a nod. "She's more than just a girl."

"Shit," Hudson mutters around his smoke, lighting it then mine with his well-worn zippo. "She's the real deal, huh?"

"I think so."

"What're you gonna do? Bud's got that big contract down in Kentucky. Don't see us swinging back to Ohio anytime soon."

"I'm not going."

Hudson blows smoke from his nose, the corner of his mouth tugging upwards. “Thattaboy.”

I stare at him. “You think it’s a good idea?”

“I think you outgrew your old man a long time ago,” he says, tapping ash from his smoke. “I think you’ve not been happy for even longer.”

I pick up my wrench, like I’m about to continue working - but I just sit there and twist my hands around it, not sure what to make of Hudson’s insight. Eventually, I blurt out, “I didn’t mean to...y’know. My head wasn’t right—the library, it—”

“I know,” he says, kindly. “I told Bud he shouldn’t have brought you on. That you can’t do libraries. But you know your old man. Stubborn like an ass.”

“I uh—” I swallow nervously, seized by the sudden urge to explain myself. “I saw it happen. Mom. When she-she...I dunno if Bud told you—”

The soft look Hudson gives me pins me to the spot. “No. He never did. Always kinda glossed over it.” He rubs his jaw, sighing. “Shit, Dino. I’m sorry you had to see that. Sure does explain a few things.”

“I haven’t told anyone. Except you and...Veronica.” I’m not quite sure why I’m telling him this. Maybe it’s because I know in three weeks, we probably won’t ever see each other again.

Hudson smiles and raises a hand to my shoulder. Hovers. When I don’t move away, he grips it, gives it a squeeze. His hand is strong and warm. I can feel his callouses even through my flannel. “She’s special to you, huh?”

“She is. To me.”

He hears what I’m not saying. “She don’t feel the same way?”

“She wants me to be different,” I explain, tossing the wrench into the toolbox. “Reckons I should be a complacent asshole like everyone else in this town.”

“Complacent? How?”

I give him a mirthless smile. “We had this thing. This *real* thing that was ours, and only ours. It was powerful. *Revolutionary*. But she got cold feet and now we pretend to be these people we’re not. And I can’t, man. She knows I can’t. And she doesn’t even look at me anymore.” I tug at my collar, letting in cool air. “Even if I try to convince her, there’s too many people standing between us.”

Hudson nods, brows creased in thought. “You try telling her that?”

“Last night.”

“And?”

I shake my head, glumly jabbing my cigarette butt into the ground.

“Did she tell you why she got cold feet?” Hudson asks.

“She’s got this...weakness. Whenever it comes out, it’s like she’s someone else. I barely recognise her.” It’s hard to keep the bitterness from my tone, and I sound like a stupid petulant kid.

He chuckles and stretches to his feet, joints popping like gunshots. “Everyone’s got different thresholds, Dino. Think of it like...I dunno. Your tolerance to drink. You like to drink, sure, but your tolerance is low as shit. On the other hand, your old man, he can drink the goddamn pope under the table.”

“The pope?” I say, blankly.

“You think that conehead bastard’s not guzzling delicious church wine in his pope castle? I bet his tolerance is godly.”

Despite myself, I burst out laughing, and Hudson joins in, white teeth flashing in the late afternoon sun. I feel a bit lighter after that. Like the two-tonne boulder in my chest has rolled away.

“I thought you were supposed to be a good bible-thumping Catholic? The *‘pope castle’*?”

“First of all, I’m Catholic. We don’t thump no bible. That’s for our khaki counterpart, the Protestants. God bless.”

“Well, you’re a terrible Catholic.”

“Fuck you. Look. Your girl’s just got a lower threshold than you, and you can’t hold it against her. You gotta do some compromising. That’s what relationships are. Compromise. You get me?”

I grimace. “I’ve tried that. I’ve tried doing it her way and it’s not working.”

“That’s not a compromise, Dino. In a compromise, there’s no ‘her way’ or ‘your way’. You both gotta meet in the middle. If one of you’s losing out, then it’s never gonna work.”

Meet in the middle? What is the middle ground for us? We kill assholes every second day and play house on every other? Or do I try being more patient? If I ease Veronica back into it, then maybe I can raise her threshold, like a frog in hot water. Maybe...our revolution can be saved.

“You’ve done this before?” I grin, kicking at his boot.

He hops out of the way, chuckling. “Once,” he admits. “He was a big-time lawyer. A real motherfucker.”

“You lost me at lawyer.”

Hudson smirks. “Yeah. He was corporate too. Pro-capitalist Reaganite.”

“Jesus Christ, Hudson. How was it?”

“How was what?”

“Fucking a giant knob?”

Our laughter cuts short when the door to the house slams open. The eye-watering stench of booze precedes the shambling, inhuman form that is Big Bud Dean. He leans heavily against the doorframe, bloodshot eyes narrowed in the light of day. An ugly scowl wrinkles his face, and I know with a stuttering heart, that we woke him up. And no-one wakes Bud unscathed.

“Morning, Boss,” Hudson says, keeping his tone light and friendly. “Sorry - did we wake you?”

“Whaddya think?” Bud growls, slurring his words almost to the point of incomprehension. His glower lands on me, and I jump to my feet, every muscle tensed and readied. “*You*. You good for nothing *shit*. You stole my money. Fifty bucks, right outta my wallet. Think I can’t count, do ya?” He lurches forward and grabs me by the collar, yanking me so close I can see every broken capillary in his jaundiced eyes.

I glare back, trying not to gag on potent ethanol fumes. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I grit out. “I think you’ve had one too many—”

“*I ain’t had enough*,” Bud growls, grabbing my face with his other hand. His grip is bruising and I stifle a wince. “You try to steal from me, punk? You try to steal from Big Bud Dean?!” He throws me into my bike, knocking it off the stand. Fire erupts across my torso as half-healed bruises collide with metal.

“Boss, hey Boss!” Hudson shouts, stepping in between Bud and my prone form. “There’s no need to get physical.”

I roll off the bike, biting back a groan, eyes watering from the pain. I grope around blindly in the toolbox. Feel the wrench, cool and inviting under my palm. I curl my hand around it.

“You stay outta this, Waters. This is a *family matter*.”

I drag myself to my feet, swaying, gripping the wrench with everything I’ve got. *I can do it. I can do it. Just one swing. That’s all it takes. One swing to cave in his skull. And he’s gone. He’s gone gone gone—*

Hudson glances over his shoulder and our eyes meet. Alarm ripples across his face.

He quickly turns to the drunkard trying to bullrush past his extended arms. “Look! Bud! I can see it right there in your pocket—!” Hudson reaches out to tug on Bud’s pocket, and sure enough, he produces a wrinkled fifty dollar note.

Bud snatches the fifty out of Hudson’s hand. Stares at it blearily. With a begrudging huff, he shoves it into his pocket and jabs a finger in my direction. “You steal from me one more time, and I’m throwin’ you to the pigs. You got that, you little *fuck*?”

Without another word, he stumbles into the house and slams the door shut. Dust rains from the ceiling, peppering our hair.

I white knuckle the wrench, tempted to follow Bud into the house and put him out of his misery. But Hudson's piercing eyes stay the bloodthirst.

"I'll pay you back," I say, flatly.

"No, you don't gotta--"

"I'll pay you back," I repeat, cold anger leaking into my tone.

There's a short silence. And a quiet, "Alright, Dino. I know you're good for it."

I drag the bike upright and Hudson quickly steps in to help – but my glower keeps him back. "You got nothing better to do?"

He raises his hands to placate me. "Maybe I should hang around for a bit. I can heat up the lasagne if you'll let me stay for dinner."

"Take it with you," I shrug, impatient to have him gone.

"Dino. Your old man...he's cut up about your mom. And the drink—it changes people. My old lady was the same. Nicest woman I ever knew, but as soon as she hit the bottle..." He slices the air with his palms, leaving the rest to the imagination. "You can't take it to heart. The things they say. They don't mean nothing--"

"Three weeks, right?"

Hudson presses his lips together and nods. "Three weeks."

"...Thanks, Hud."

He leaves soon after that, when he realises that I'm done talking to him.

That night, I heat up the lasagne for dinner and down about half of it in one sitting. It's damn good. Lots of oregano. Veronica would have liked it.

Monday morning, I ride into school earlier than usual, eager to get away from Bud's drunken rants. I have time to kill, so I head into the AV room to get ready for assembly. I'd quit the club, considering what happened on Friday, but Hudson's advice about compromise keeps me cautious. If I'm to make things right with Veronica, I gotta keep playing the part of 'painfully normal boyfriend'. Although, I'd rather just *Ich Luge* myself in the head.

I'm not surprised at all to see everyone already gathered in the AV room. It's a chaos of cords and cameras and audio equipment. Siouxsie's attempting to explain the set up above all the noise; Charlie smoking a spliff while filming herself like a bad Warhol film; Amir's quietly

prepping a boom mic, looking overwhelmed; and Bentley's complaining that Siouxsie's set up isn't 'feasible'.

"We don't know where the news crews are going to be," Bentley says, hitching a camera onto his shoulder. He zooms in on Siouxsie who scowls at him, arms akimbo. "I don't even know *why* we're filming this."

"Who cares why we're filming? If Gowan wants us to film, we film. The guy's a dick but he funds the club."

"Sellout," Charlie says, rocking the camera from side to side. "Reckon I can make people seasick if I film like this?"

"This is the system we live in - and I love money."

Charlie makes a dismayed noise. "Who *are* you?"

Siouxsie clicks her tongue and rolls her eyes. "Anyway, we have three angles we need to cover. If the news crews are in our way, they move for us. Got it?"

A half-hearted chorus of agreement responds, just as Siouxsie notices me hovering in the doorway. She gives me a jagged smile and crosses her arms. "Rain Man. Didn't think you'd show."

I glance at Bentley and we lock eyes for a moment, before he quickly looks away, pretending to be busy with his camera. I pace over to him and pick up the second camera.

"I'm a Techie, ain't I?" I grunt, holding up the gear.

Siouxsie hums in approval. "Good to see you've finally assimilated."

"No Dunnstock today?" I say to Bentley, pointedly ignoring our glorified leader.

He shrugs and mumbles something incoherent. I stare at him for a moment, wondering what Dunnstock might have said to him. All those things she said, about knowing - that wasn't real. Wasn't it?

Bentley raises his head and catches my stare, which seems to make him uneasy, because he starts stuttering and cringing. "She's having s-second thoughts about joining. I d-don't think she really had any interest in this stuff..."

"Trouble in paradise?" I raise a brow.

"Something like that."

"Because of Friday."

He nervously adjusts his coke bottle glasses. "Maybe."

"So she dumped your ass."

“No,” he says, quickly. “We’re...on a bit of a break. That’s all.”

“She dumped your ass, Benson,” I scoff and set the camera down. Why do they gotta make these things so damn heavy? I look over at Bentley and my stomach gives an unpleasant lurch. His coke bottle glasses are fogged up. Like he’s—

“I don’t know what’s going on with you and Martha,” he sniffs, clearing the foggy lenses with his fingers like windshield wipers. “But whatever it is, you better deal with it.”

I grimace, unsettled by both the crying and Bentley’s warning. “What did she say to you?”

“She kept asking me about you,” he warbles. “Stuff like whether you own a gun. Or if you ever talked about Ram. She even asked me for your locker combination—”

Fuck. I *knew* she was onto me. My paranoia was justified.

“JD, man, I’m sorry for what I said. I was upset. Thought you were trying to hurt me or something because you wanted Martha for yourself—”

I choke on air. “*What? Are you high?*” We both automatically glance at Charlie who smiles dopily and waves. Judging by the amount of smoke she’s producing, I suppose we’re pretty much hotboxing it.

“I don’t know. I wasn’t thinking straight.” Bentley sighs and hugs the camera to his chest, cradling it like it’s a baby. “I guess I was so excited about having a girlfriend. You know, like you and Veronica. I was hoping we could go on a double date and— ah, nevermind. It’s stupid.”

I rub the side of my face, debating whether to just walk out right now. But *compromise* - and that means playing nice with Bentley. “...You’re not a prop,” I eventually mutter. “Or a nix.” And this begrudging acknowledgement is enough to draw a wobbly smile onto his face.

“Thanks, man,” he says, earnestly. “I appreciate it.”

“*Are you two gonna fuck?*” Siouxsie yells, looking queasy. “Or can we be done with this bromantic bullshit?”

“Hey, Prez, there’s nothing wrong with showing affection,” Charlie says.

“Sure, as long as it’s not in front of me,” Siouxsie scowls. “Now get your asses to the gymnasium. I want everything set up before homeroom.” She glares at us when we take too long to move. “*Vamos, dense prisa!* Or I’ll throw you out the window for insubordination!”

“You’re extra tyrannical today,” I say. “Low blood sugar?”

“Skipped breakfast,” Siouxsie grumps and stomps out the door.

After homeroom, I try to catch up with Veronica as we make our way to the gymnasium - but Martha's already got her claws in her. The two split off from the crowd and slip into the empty science lab. I hover outside, trying to listen to their conversation through the small crack in the door.

"Veronica, I need your help."

I hear Veronica pull out a stool, legs scraping across the linoleum. "Sure, with what?"

"I've been thinking. And doing a bit of digging."

"...Okay," Veronica's tone is wary.

"I can trust you, right? I know we haven't really hung out for a while, but-but you're my best friend."

"Of course you can trust me. And - for what it's worth - I'm sorry for blowing you off on Saturday. We can have a sleepover this weekend, if you'd like?"

"I would. Very much."

"So what do you want to tell me?"

Martha exhales shakily. "Something doesn't add up about Ram and Kurt's death. Veronica, I think they were *murdered*."

A stunned silence follows. I lean heavily against the door frame, trying to control my breathing.

"Why would you say that?" Veronica says, breaking the silence. Her voice is controlled. Even. But I can tell she's panicking. "They found a suicide note."

"It could have been faked. I mean, you forge stuff all the time, right?"

"Who'd want to kill Ram and Kurt?"

"...How well do you know JD?"

I grab the door handle - but I don't rip it open. I just stand there, heart hammering, mouth dry, feeling so numb I don't even know if I'm actually here.

"Why do you ask?" Veronica's voice sounds like it's underwater.

"I know you like him, but I think he might have something to do with it. Remember the way he went after them in the cafeteria?"

"They went after him first."

"There's something *off* about him. You know what I'm talking about, don't you?"

The stool scrapes across the floor again and Veronica's heels click from one end of the room to the other. She's pacing.

"I tried talking to him on Friday," Martha says. "Tried to be friendly. But he started yelling at me and saying all kinds of crazy stuff. And then he tried to turn Benny against me. Why would he do that?"

"He's going through some things."

"We all go through some things and no-one acts the way he does. You weren't *there*. You didn't see how *angry* he was. He looked like he wanted to k-kill me." Martha draws in a deep breath, as if to calm herself. "I want to look in JD's locker. I thought maybe you could get me the combination."

"Martha...this is a pretty wild theory."

"I don't care what they were saying at the funeral! Ram was *not* gay. I'd stake my life on it—"

"Ram was gay, Martha. Why would you think anything else?"

"He kissed me, remember? On the kickball field."

"Yeah, in kindergarten!"

"My heart knows the truth. Why would Ram write me that note if he didn't still feel something?"

I straighten up, remembering the note I watched Veronica forge all those weeks ago at Chandler's behest. Duke slipped the note onto Dunnstock's tray, leading the latter to believe that her one-sided crush on Ram Sweeney wasn't so one-sided. Martha was the butt of the joke for the rest of the day - hell, I *still* hear people snickering about it in the halls...

Wait. This is the only evidence that Martha has? *A forged note?*

"Why would he invite me to his homecoming party?" Martha continues, insistent. "I need that locker combination, Veronica. If you can't give it to me, I'm gonna confront JD."

"*No!*"

Veronica's footsteps freeze, mid-pace. In a mean, sardonic tone that reminds me of Chandler, she sneers, "You *floor* me, Martha. You really do."

"What do you mean?"

"Ram didn't write that love note. *I did.*"

Martha pulls in a sharp breath. Her dismay is palpable. "No...y-you wouldn't..."

"I would. *I did.* The Heathers put me up to it. The whole school was in on the joke, and *nobody* laughed harder than Ram. He didn't love you, Martha. He was a dick, he's dead,

move on!”

Martha doesn't say anything. I see her in my mind's eye - staring at Veronica, glasses fogging over like Bentley's as she struggles to process this betrayal. And then, her sneakered footsteps start towards the door.

I step away, concealing myself behind a group of students milling around the lockers. With no small amount of satisfaction, I watch Martha fling open the door and race down the hall, cheeks blotchy red and shining with tears.

Soon after, Veronica steps out, pale and grim-faced. She stares at Martha's retreating back, before sweeping her gaze around.

Her eyes catch on mine. My breath catches in my throat. I try to smile, but it probably comes out wrong, because she recoils slightly, like I've slapped her in the face.

She gives the tiniest shake of her head, turns on her heels, and heads towards the gym.

Siouxsie has me in the corner of the gym, filming the stage by the bleachers. Turns out we don't have to fight for territory with the news, since only one crew has even bothered to show up, and it's for community television. Regardless, everyone - students and faculty alike - have on this weird performative air, and it's like I turned the wrong corner and stepped into a hyper-real, exaggerated version of Westerburg.

It makes me uneasy, and I itch for a cigarette. I focus on Veronica instead, who's sitting near the back of the bleachers, next to McNamara and Duke. She's practically in McNamara's lap for how close they are, heads together and chatting intimately.

I feel an urgent tap on my arm and I almost jump outta my skin. It's Amir, holding the boom mic - he's eyeballing me. Then I realise I'm white knuckling the camera and I instantly relax my grip. He huffs and returns to checking his levels.

A hush goes over the gym and, in true Pauline Fleming fashion, she sweeps onto the stage and into the spotlight. It's bright inside, but it seems she insisted on a spotlight anyway. She's in this glittering, diaphanous robe that sparkles obnoxiously with every minute motion. It's dizzying.

“Welcome, welcome, Westerburg High!” she sings into the mic. A pause to squint at the news crew, who's stationed themselves near the stage. “And welcome to you, Sherwood, Ohio! Welcome to this special assembly.” Her bright red mouth stretches into a garish smile. “Now, students, I want you to ignore the television cameras. They're just here to document this significant moment of healing. The Westerburg Suicides were tough on all of us, but we shared the pain of losing three very popular souls.” An appropriately solemn silence descends. Fleming wipes at her eyes, as though she were crying. “Whether to kill yourself or not is one of the most important decisions a teenager can make. So do you know what I'm going to do right now?”

“Kill yourself on stage?” someone shouts from the bleachers.

A ripple of laughter breaks the solemnity. I smirk and zoom in on Fleming’s face, which contorts spectacularly for a few seconds.

“That’s not productive, Dwight!” she says, shrilly. Then, remembering herself, she clears her throat and smiles dazzlingly into the cameras. Her tone, once more dulcet and melodic. “My senior thesis at Berkeley was on the subject of paediatric horticultural psychotherapy. So I speak with some authority when I tell you that the way to eliminate suicide is by first eliminating fear. And we achieve this by creating a safe zone in which we are all equal!” She sweeps her arms out dramatically, and stares at the audience expectantly. There’s scattered applause and her smile widens in satisfaction. “Let my words liberate you. Open your petals and reveal your hopes and fears!”

Fleming hops off the stage with the mic and prances about in front of the bleachers.

“Everyone has scars and flaws and nasty little feelings we hide from the world. But I am here to tell you this: if we show these ugly parts of ourselves, we will realise that they are *beautiful*. Let in the sunlight. Photosynthesise! *Photosynthesise!* And let yourself SHINE!”

Another awkward smattering of applause.

Fleming twirls around and stares directly into the camera. “Who wants to share what’s in their heart?” A short beat. “No volunteers? Then allow me to lead by example.” She lowers her voice to an intimate volume. “My name is Pauline Fleming. I am a divorced mother of three and I live alone in my chateau. Yes, yes, I did very well in the settlement, but what is a chateau when my only companion is crippling loneliness? Now, I was a child of the sixties, so of course, I joined the revolution. Free love, civil rights, the Beatles – things were bad, boss, a veritable blast. And you’d think, given my disposition, I’d be right on the frontlines, changing history! But it wasn’t like that. I tried to change the world and I barely made a dent. The revolution was over, and I was left in the dust. Left to the very pits of despair. And that’s when I met Guru Druj Vindhyavasini–”

Fleming goes on for a while, until even Gowan starts checking his watch and tapping his foot impatiently. I leave the camera on the tripod and squat down beside it, pulling out my tattered (and taped) copy of *The Ego and Its Own* to read. I can feel Amir peer curiously over my shoulder, and at some point, we end up reading Stirner together, like it’s a comic book.

“--shaved my head and returned to Ohio in an Amish paddywagon.” Fleming takes a deep, cleansing breath. “That felt *fan-frickin’-TASTIC!* C’mon, kids! Work with me! I want you to share that pain. Drag it out into the light where everyone can look at it. Do as Pauline Fleming does–!”

“I’ve thought about killing myself.”

Every single head whips towards McNamara, who stands in the bleachers looking terrified.

Duke yanks on McNamara’s skirt, snapping, “What the *hell* are you doing?!”

Fleming gasps like she just won the Nobel Peace Prize. She gestures for McNamara to join her. “No, no, no. Don’t stop, Heather. You’re in a safe place. Come down and—that’s it, right here, stand right here in front of everyone.” She hands McNamara the mic and gives her shoulders an encouraging squeeze. “Remember. It’s just you and me and the classmates who love you and the television cameras broadcasting this to the entire southeast Ohio region. *Share*. It’s going to be okay.” Fleming steps back, and the spotlight focuses on the panicked Heather.

I quietly close my book and stand up to operate the camera. *Finally*. Even this is better than Fleming's inane posturing.

“My sort-of boyfriend killed himself because he was gay for his linebacker,” McNamara begins, shakily. She grips the mic in both hands like it’s a lifeline. “And my best friend seemed to have it all together, but she’s gone too. Now my stomach’s hurting worse and worse, and every morning on the bus I feel my heart beating louder and faster, and I’m like *Jesus*, I’m on the frickin’ bus again because all my rides to school are dead.” She swallows and glances into the light, squinting a tad. “Heather’s note really affected me. It could have been a page out of my diary. Every day, I have to be perfect. I have to have the perfect hair, the perfect outfit, the perfect smile. If I say the wrong thing, it could destroy my entire social life. I-I feel like I’m on a lifeboat in a storm, but it’s not big enough for everyone so I might as well just...jump.” She pulls in a deep breath and exhales slowly. When she raises her head, she’s different. Changed. Like the blurry lines of her borders have sharpened, and she’s in high definition. Everyone *sees* her. I see her.

I glance up from the camera to McNamara, feeling like I just solved a piece of a puzzle I never knew I was working on.

“What’s your damage, Heather?” Duke’s taunting voice shatters the gravity of the moment.

Fleming fumes, “*Heather!*”

“Where’s your school spirit? You don’t deserve to wear Westerburg school colours.”

“Don’t be mean spirited!”

Duke ignores her, a cruel smirk etched onto her face. “Why don’t you hop into your little lifeboat and catch a *gnarly wave* over to Remington?”

Jeers and laughter fill the gym and Fleming rushes about in a fluster, trying to maintain control. “Knock it off! Settle down, settle down!”

Someone shouts, “Aw, look! Heather’s gonna cry!” And the laughter gains more body.

“Whine, whine, whine,” Duke taunts. “You’re *pathetic*, Heather. Go and bitch and moan - you’re finished at Westerburg. Do you hear me? *Finished.*”

McNamara stares at the jeering audience, the multiple cameras, the spotlight capturing her on the spot, and her wide eyes glisten with tears. She drops the mic and runs for the exit, sobbing loudly.

“Young lady, you are *suspended!*” Fleming shrieks at a smug-faced Duke, before turning to the cameras and waving her arms about wildly. “Turn off the cameras! *Turn them off, goddammit!!*”

Veronica marches down the bleachers. “Is that all you care about?” she shouts, dark eyes flashing dangerously. “*TV cameras?*”

Fleming holds her arms akimbo as she meets Veronica’s glare with one of her own. “I care about saving lives! Heather Duke ruined a *valuable* teaching moment—”

“‘Valuable’? None of us want this spectacle!” Veronica grips her hair, pale and wide-eyed. “Heather Mac trusted you! You said you’d protect her, but you’re powerless. You’re *useless*.” She whips around to snarl at the other students. “*You’re all idiots!*”

This is bad. Worse than bad. This is potentially handcuff inducing. I call out sharply, “*Veronica*. You should sit down. *Now*.”

But she doesn’t hear me. Or she doesn’t want to hear me. “Heather Chandler was a monster, just like Kurt and Ram. They didn’t kill themselves! *I KILLED THEM!*”

My heart drops to the pits of my stomach. I stand there, frozen in time, static roaring in my ears. *This can’t be happening. Not now. Not like this. Not when our revolution’s barely begun—*

Duke barks a laugh. I start and check the bleachers. No-one’s horrified or shocked or angered by Veronica’s confession. No, it’s the *opposite*. They’re...they’re goddamn *laughing* like it’s the funniest fucking thing they ever heard.

“*God*,” Duke jeers above the racket. “Some people will say *anything* for attention.”

Veronica looks like she’s about to be sick. She flees the gym, following McNamara’s path out the double doors. I abandon my post and run after her, chased by Amir’s colourful insults and Fleming’s call for us to come back.

When I round the corner in the hallway, I see the wing of Veronica’s blue blazer disappear into the girl’s bathroom. I pause outside, catching my breath, slipping a cigarette between my lips. *Fuck it*. I deserve it after that goddamn scare. If alcoholism or a traffic accident doesn’t kill me, then it’s definitely going to be Veronica goddamn Sawyer.

Two voices echo within the bathroom, bouncing off the tiled walls. I stiffen in surprise and almost singe my eyebrows. It’s McNamara and Veronica.

“What are you trying to do? Kill me?”

“What were you trying to do? Sleep?” Veronica sounds exasperated, scared.

“Suicide is a private thing!”

“Throwing your life away to be a statistic in *USA Today*? It’s the least private thing I can think of.”

“...But what about Heather and Ram and Kurt?”

“If everyone jumped off a bridge, young lady, would you?”

Sniffs fill the silence, before McNamara replies in a watery voice, “Probably...”

“Hey now...” Veronica's tone becomes tender. Warm. “If you were happy every day of your life, you wouldn’t be a human being. You’d be a game show host.”

McNamara giggles through her tears. “Like Alex Trebek?”

“But with better skin and sans moustache.”

“Thanks for coming after me, Vee.”

“You’re welcome. Let’s ditch. Buy some shoes. Something lame like that.”

“Sounds very.”

Veronica emerges from the bathroom hand in hand with a puffy-eyed McNamara. They stop dead when they see me.

“Not now, JD,” Veronica grimaces and tugs McNamara away.

I narrow my eyes in anger. Try to snatch her free hand. “Veronica—”

“*Not now!*” Her shout hits me like a slap to the face. I flinch and step back, heart stuttering.

Veronica bites her lip. There's a flicker of regret. “Later,” she says, quietly. “At yours.”

I nod reluctantly and watch them leave, clasping hands. A beam of sunlight hits them as they push open the doors and step outside, and they shine so bright it hurts to breathe.

Chapter End Notes

Woo! I'm on a roll :D

Here's another chapter - this time a bit longer at almost 6k words.

Yeesh. JD's really grasping at straws. He's totally abandoned the idea of normalcy and is edging his way back into his 'revolution' bs. And by compromise, he doesn't mean to compromise at all lol. The inevitable break up (and subsequent fallout) is looming c:
It was actually really enjoyable writing him with a calmer mindset here. I think Hudson's positive presence really helped - so much so that JD was able to make up with Bentley. Too bad it didn't last that long :(

I'm trying to figure out what I want to write after this fic. I'm thinking either a gender-bent AU with a sociopathic Veronica and a moralistic JD? Maybe a gayification, where

they are both the same sex? Or maybe a modern-day AU? I don't really know. I just want to keep writing about JD and Veronica ;u; What do you think?

I hope the chapter is okay. Please let me know your thoughts! x

Chapter 20: i say no

Chapter Summary

a monster, two broken promises, and the beginning of the end.

Chapter Notes

CW: Explicit language, alcohol abuse, physical/emotional abuse, gun use/shooting.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“So I’m guessing you’re mad about that confession.”

It’s the first thing she says when she climbs in through my window, bringing in a nauseating wave of McNamara’s perfume. She’s saved me from any mention of the half-drunk whiskey bottle in my hand and the chaotic state of my room.

“Not mad. Confused.” I swing my legs over the side of my bed. I must look - and smell - a state. Cigarette ash and whiskey stains. Not dissimilar to Bud at his worst. “I mean, you’re the one that wanted us to be ‘normal’. I did that. I joined the goddamn AV Club for *you*.”

Veronica grimaces and leans against my desk - for once, unable to meet my eyes. “I know,” she says, softly. “I know it wasn’t easy for you.”

I take a swig and whiskey drips down my chin. I swipe at it, feeling feral. I’m careening. I’m a thousand feet up in the air with no way down. “What do you think would’ve happened, if they’d actually believed your confession?”

She just stares at the ground.

“Handcuffs.” I rise unsteadily to my feet. “Separate cells. Cops trying to turn us against each other – right up until they ship us to different prisons. Is that what you want?” The bottle bumps into her leg. We’re inches apart.

Veronica raises her head then and looks straight into my eyes. “No,” she intones.

“So *what* then? Why the confession?”

She grits her teeth. Anger - or hate - flashes across her face. “Everybody’s cashing in on these fake suicides, making it all about themselves. It’s a sick trend - and *we* started it.”

“Turning ourselves in won’t stop human nature.”

“*You were there. You saw* what happened. Fleming’s little kumbaya party almost ended with Heather Mac dead on the bathroom floor!”

McNamara. Of course. It all comes down to McNamara.

Frothing, acerbic rage consumes the last of my self-control and I hurl the bottle at the wall with a drunken, guttural yell.

Veronica cringes; raises her hands to protect her face. *Fear*. That’s how she’s looking at me. With fear.

Ice douses my insides. *She’s scared of me*. Veronica is staring at me like I’m about to hurt her.

Aren’t I about to hurt her? Where did I think I could go from here?

Regret comes as a stab to the gut and I scramble to remedy the situation. *Too loud. Too angry. People don’t like it when you’re too loud and too angry.*

I force myself to soften my tone and grasp her face between my palms. She flinches at my touch. “Heather Duke is the monster, not Fleming. *She’s* the one who made McNamara wanna die. If you want to slay the dragon - then *cut off its head*.”

Veronica pushes against my chest. “*Stop.*”

I turn my back on her and pace my room, from wall to wall like a caged animal, itching to throw my fists at *something*. “You’d rather treat the bubonic plague with *bandaids*,” I sneer. “A convenient solution that has no real implication. A fucking *comma*. We had the power to change things. To reset the world and make history. But we gave it all up to become ‘normal’ teenagers.” A scathing laugh rips outta me. “Good luck at school tomorrow, Heather Mac! Hope you don’t *die!*”

“*No*. We are *out* of the change business. You made me a promise, remember? And I’m going to hold you to it—”

“Doesn’t it bother you that Duke’s walking around without facing *any* consequences? She almost killed McNamara and no-one’s doing anything about it. She’s free to keep pushing people over the edge and you wanna look the other way, just like everyone-else in this shitstain of a town—”

“*Listen to me!*” Veronica’s desperate cry snaps me back to my senses. She takes my hands into hers and brings me close. Her beautiful face is imploring. Passionate.

I glare down at her, breathing hard.

“You promised me, JD,” she murmurs. “Remember?”

Veronica brings my knuckles to her lips; grazes a kiss across the scarred skin. That single tender action soothes the blister of my rage. The noise dims just enough for me to grasp my thoughts. *What am I doing? This isn't a compromise. This is sabotage.*

I release a shaky breath and touch my forehead to hers. "Okay," I mumble. "Okay, you're right. I'm sorry."

A hesitant smile graces her lips. The air around us is so fragile - a single word could shatter everything we've salvaged. "It's okay," she hums, and tilts her head for another kiss. "It's going to be okay."

And for a moment, everything aligns, and all the rage and fear and noise just...disappears. Veronica fills my vision. A blurry impression of her haunting dark eyes and bright blue blazer and the crooked smile that turns every organ to mush, and it's her lips on my lips, softer than satin, and it's her scent, floral and a little smoky, and it's her voice murmuring my name, and it's nothing else because nothing else matters.

There is no revolution. There is no war. There is no salvation nor condemnation. No Heathers, no Marthas, no Buds. There is only us - independently damaged but together paragonic. Together, we are god.

But of course. The thing about perfection is that it's unattainable. Otherwise, we would have died out as a species millenia ago.

The door slams open.

"Stop playin' grab-ass and wait for me in the car!"

Veronica tears herself away from me, quickly straightening out her clothes. I remain where I am, frozen in place, hands hovering in the air where she stood seconds ago.

Bud swaggers in with a bloodshot glare, hangover effusing from his bullish figure in gut-churning rage and nauseating stench. He barely casts a glance at Veronica, who stands at the window, wary and alert.

Everything good and light drains out of me like I've been punctured. There's the familiar tension that Bud brings into every room he staggers into. A tension that causes my heart to palpitate. It's both sheer and smothering.

I curl my hands into tight fists. "I'm in the middle of something." My voice shakes. I feel myself shrinking with every defiant word.

"I need back-up," Bud grunts, approaching me with a mean glint in his eyes. "There's another job for us - an office block that's gotta come down. *Kaboom.*" He emphasises the last by splaying both hands, indicating an explosion.

Despite myself, I flinch and glance away.

Veronica enters my vision, golden sunlight ringing her silhouette. She radiates this intense *brilliance*, and her light swells within me, burns me bad from the inside. I get the distinct

feeling that I'm on trial.

Without thinking, I say to Bud in a caustic tone, "I *said* I'm busy!"

In a blink, he's got me by the nape, thick fingers digging deep into my throat until shadows dance around my periphery. He brings his face close, teeth bared in an ugly grin, "Lotta pretty women out there, *sport*," he sneers. "I can make another son anytime I want." He slams me into the wall, cracking the plaster. I bite my cheek and taste copper. "*Now get your ass in the car!*"

Even after he stalks out of the room, his oppressive presence remains. Thick, turbid darkness coils and strangles. I fray at the edges, coming apart like wet paper.

"JD..."

Veronica's soft voice grates against my nerves. The look she's giving me - it hurts more than every beatdown combined. *Disgust*. She's looking at me with disgust. First fear, then disgust. If she didn't see it before, she does now. She finally sees me for what I am: a pathetic, chickenshit nix masquerading as a person. It dissolves the last shred of composure. The noise, the chaos, it *implodes*.

When the world comes back into focus, I'm striding down the hallway, pistol raised and pointed at Bud's retreating form.

He stops to open the front door. I have precious seconds. I cock the gun. Finger the trigger. He's within my sights, I'm aiming at his head, one shot is all it takes, one shot and his head explodes, one shot and he's dead.

Kaboom.

I level the gun. Squeeze the trigger. And—

Mom wasn't smiling. She was scared.

Bud disappears out the door and it swings shut behind him.

BANG.

The television screen explodes. Sparks and glass whizz through the air like shrapnel.

From the driveway, Bud's enraged shout comes muffled but distinct. "*Dammit, Jason! No firearms in the house!*"

I sag against the kitchen counter, sweat stinging my eyes. I feel like I'm drowning, *suffocating*, and the smoking gun in my hand is the only thing keeping me alive.

"...Why are you carrying a gun?"

Veronica's hovering in the hallway, white knuckling her skirt as she stares at me, pale and wide-eyed.

“‘Cus it pissed off my dad.” I sound broken. “It’s funny.”

Anger tightens her expression. “None of this is *funny*,” she snaps. “Why are you carrying a loaded weapon?!”

“*For protection!*” I snarl, slamming my fist against the counter. The pistol cracks against the cheap wood and she recoils.

“Against what? *Reruns?*”

“You know what kind of person he is.”

“We were done with this, JD!” she cries, clenching and twisting her collar like she's trying to choke herself out. “I thought you loved me.”

My heart plummets. “I do!”

“I thought you chose us.”

“*I did!*”

Veronica raises her chin, every muscle in her body straining. “I never should have trusted you.”

There’s glass in my veins and chaos in my head, and my body moves like it's not my own. “We have gotta stop pretending.” I raise the pistol demonstratively. “*This* is what I am. This is what I’ll always be. And no amount of play-acting will change that. If you don’t like it, then take it up with *him*.” I jab the muzzle at the front door, smirking, but it's lacklustre. “He made me.”

“Martha was right about you,” Veronica whispers through pale lips. “Martha was right and I broke her heart.”

“Now, let’s have a *real* conversation.” In two strides, I close the gap between us. She doesn’t shrink away as I loom over her, gun in hand, a vicious grin cutting into my face. “Let’s talk about *Heather Duke*.”

Even when she glares up at me with nothing but hate, I want to drag her into my arms and kiss her until she stops breathing. “*No*,” she says, resolutely. “Let's talk about *you*.”

“Alright,” I say in mock enthusiasm, “let’s talk about me. You wanna start? Dealer’s choice.”

“I love you, JD.”

My grotesque smile wavers.

“I love you,” she continues. “But you’re like a drug. And not the good kind either. Every time you look at me or talk to me, I get swept up in you, and everything that’s terrible and fucked just *disappears*. Like it's all been erased. I can almost live with myself, with what I've done. And for a time, I thought it could work. I thought *we* could work. Now I realise that you were

a lie. I let myself believe in you because it was easier than facing the truth, and that's not me." She exhales sharply and raises her chin. "That's not me, JD."

"*We* were the truth," I growl, clenching the gun so hard, it rattles. "Our revolution was the truth. But you had to go and ruin everything because of *misplaced guilt*—"

"There is no revolution. There's only your poison, infecting everything and everyone it touches." She gives me a thin, disdainful smile. "You never loved me. You just wanted to use me to justify your personal vendetta against the world."

"There's nothing to justify when all I've done is *good*—"

"All you've done is *destruction*," Veronica bites back. "You're not a god. You're an angry, fucked up teenager who needs to see a goddamn shrink."

I flinch, my resolve crumbling. "You...you can't do this. You can't do this to us."

"You've been dealt a shitty hand. And I'm sorry, JD. I really am. But you can't blame everyone else for the decisions *you* make. You choose to hurt people. That's on you." She raises her hands, as if in surrender. "I'm done with it. I'm done with you."

"Veronica, you can't do this. You can't leave me. *You promised!*"

"And you promised you'd change."

I surge forward, blinded, reeling, *howling*, "***BUT I LOVE YOU!***" and I see terror flash in her eyes, followed by a deep, consuming scorn, and I realise that I'm pointing the gun at her, finger on the trigger like I'm about to—

My hand goes lax. Numb. The pistol clatters at my feet.

We stare at each other and the chasm is back, but this time there's no way across. She's an aeon away from me. Two minutes and an eternity. And whatever stands here, wearing my skin, using my name, is everyone else but me. I want to ask her, *how can I take my name back?* but I don't, because I already know her answer and it just might kill me anyway.

Veronica brushes past me and I grab her arm in a final desperation. "Don't leave me. Veronica, *please*—" But she rips her arm free and continues on, unhindered, unshaken.

When she opens the door, she pauses and turns her head to reveal a stony profile. And in that moment, I see her for what she truly is. "Goodbye, JD." And she steps into the daylight, gone, gone, long before she disappears from sight.

I stand there, alone in that dark, empty house, seized by a kind of delirium; voices rising and falling like the torrid tides. A careening laugh escapes. Paints my madness on the walls. I pick up the gun. Into the abyss, heaven or hell, what difference does it make?

A short one this time sorry! This scene is THE turning point in the story - the beginning of the end - so I decided to make this its own chapter. The next one will be much longer!

Just a heads up, things will be getting super dark and angsty from here (even more than usual). Please mind the content warnings at the start of every chapter and the tags (which I try to keep updated).

This chapter was very challenging since it's an important scene (and number) in the musical, and I wanted to put my own spin to it. Hopefully I managed to pull it off while remaining faithful to the source. I would have liked to highlight more of Veronica's moment of empowerment here, but since this is from JD's POV, it was very difficult to do so. Even the way she **looks** at him is grievously misconstrued.

Thank you for reading! Please let me know what you think :)

Chapter 21: big fun

Chapter Summary

C4, a big fun party, and a photo

Chapter Notes

CW: Explicit language, explosives, mental illness, hallucinations, alcohol & inebriation, mentions of abuse, physical violence, brief hint at inappropriate relations with a minor (it's very brief and doesn't go anywhere), and mentions of s*icide and s*icide attempts. This chapter may be very triggering, so please proceed with caution.

If you or anyone you know is struggling with s*icide or s*icidal thoughts, please contact your local emergency services and seek help.

International s*icide prevention resources can be found here:

<https://blog.opencounseling.com/suicide-hotlines/>

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“Dino? You okay?”

I stare at the block of C4 that I’m supposed to pack in with the others, but I can’t move past a mental block. My thoughts drifting and there’s one that keeps hooking into me, refusing to let me go.

“Dino?” Hudson grabs my elbow, jerking me out of my daze. “This isn’t a good time to be zoning out, buddy.” He looks pointedly at the C4 in my hands.

I toss it at the base of the column and Hudson winces. “Easy, easy. I’d like to get outta here relatively intact...”

“You’ll live,” I say impassively, fishing out another block from the box.

I glance around the empty office floor, silently noting the frayed grey carpeting and bland off-white walls. There’s a mouldy poster on the wall of a cat clinging to a branch (*‘Hang in there!’*). Being an adult must be fucking miserable. Is this what we’re so desperately racing towards? It’s like a fifty-year trial from hell that no-one ever wins, and the only thing between us and a beretta lobotomy is a stupid pun.

Hudson stoops to unwrap the discarded C4 and pack it in properly. “So are you gonna tell me what’s eating you? Or are we gonna drag this one out, like last time?” He shoots me a furtive grin. “I’ll even let you punch me if it’ll get you talking.”

I stare at him, wordless, unsure of what to say. What can I say? When I can only see one inch beyond myself and everything else is black.

“I don’t know.”

And I must look as lost as I feel because Hudson frowns and stands up, pulling off his gloves. “What happened? Is it your old man?”

I give a tiny shake of the head. If only it were that simple.

And then he must have remembered something, because he pulls in a sharp breath. “Ah. It’s your girl.”

“Veronica.”

“That’s the one.”

“I think...I did something wrong. Or maybe I was right and she just couldn't see it.”

“She didn’t wanna compromise?”

“I showed her my hand and she walked out the door.”

Hudson’s expression tightens. “Look, Dino. You gave it a shot—”

“It’s over.” I give him a cold look. *Compromise?* Veronica was never willing to meet me halfway. I was guiled by her smiles and appeasements like a dumb animal chasing after a shiny thing.

Hudson meets my glare without flinching, but his lips twitch into a frown and his expression becomes complicated. Unreadable. He knocks his head towards the back door and, reluctantly, I follow him outside. I could use a smoke anyway.

It’s a cold day. The ripe midday sun does little to alleviate the bite of the autumn chill. When we both light up in the carpark, the smoke mingles with the plumes of our breath. In the distance, I can hear the growling engine of the excavator.

Hudson leans against the graffitied wall, silently scrutinising me as I try my best to ignore him. Eventually, he says, “I’m sorry, Dino.” And I don’t know why, but I believe him.

Something in his eyes stays the worst of my anger; grates away at me enough to lower my hackles. I push smoke out my nose and scuff my boot against a lone brick. “I gave her a piece of me, Hud, and she couldn’t stomach it. She got cold feet and left me in the dust like we meant nothing.” I bare my teeth in an illusion of a smile. “But the worst part is that I almost ruined everything for her. I got weak. Thought maybe she was right.”

“Right about what?”

“*Assimilating.*” I spit out the word like it’s poison. “I don’t even know who she is anymore. Maybe she was fucking with me all this time, I dunno.”

Hudson sighs and raises a hand to my shoulder. His palm hovers before grasping me lightly. “Maybe it wasn’t meant to be. Me and my ex? Despite our differences, I thought we were end game. Then one day, I snapped out of it, and I realised that we were slowly killing each other. Driving each other insane. When love’s involved, it’s hard to see what’s really there in front of us. Doubly if we’re too close.” He raises the corner of his mouth and his smoke bobbles. “You get me?”

I do. I get him. It doesn’t mean I like what he’s saying. How could Veronica and I not be ‘end game’? That’s the whole point of us. We are the trigger for the end; the cataclysmic prelude to the new world. And I’m supposed to sit back and let it all slip outta my hands, because she’s got blinders on?

I stare at my smoke, watching the ember eat away the paper and tobacco. Is this what mom felt? That thick, sluggish dread strangling her organs. Counting down the ticking seconds as she waved at me through the window...

“Hudson,” I croak. “Do I ruin people?”

He stares at me, taken aback by my question. Then he wordlessly pulls me into a tight embrace. I go with it. Let him reel me into his arms. I see his expression and I can’t read it, but I know it’s something good, something kind, and I’m scared that it’s not real, that it’ll disappear like everything else in my life, so I reach for his nape and nudge his face close.

Delirious. Desperate. An offering in lieu of abandonment.

Two firm hands grab me by the shoulders. Holds me back. Our faces, mere inches away.

“No, Jason,” Hudson murmurs, brows furrowed. Dismay - or is that disgust? - settles into his tanned face. “This isn’t good for anyone. Least of all for you.”

I stare at him, unstable, unmoored. My heart twists. A burst of anger and humiliation corrodes, and for a wild moment, I think I’m gonna punch him.

Instead of raising my fist, I wrench myself away from his grasp and stumble into the wall. I lean against it, battling a sudden swell of nausea like I’ve been drinking. “Sorry,” I laugh. It comes out bitter. I hate myself for it. “I figured, since we’re both single, why not have fun? I guess I’m not your type, huh?”

“Well, for one. I like adults.”

I huff and slide down the wall, squat down to my haunches. “I’m seventeen.”

“Exactly.” Hudson sighs and crouches beside me, finishing his smoke. “Dino, all I want from you is for you to be okay. You don’t gotta try so hard to keep me around.”

“‘Okay’?” I glare narrowly at my cigarette. The ember reaches my fingers, burning blisters into my skin, but I keep it there. After a while, I get numb, and I don’t feel anything at all. “I don’t understand. Why do you want me to be ‘okay’ when you...” I trail off. Unable to verbalise my thoughts. *Is that all I am to you? A stupid kid you feel obliged to?*

I glance at Hudson and see the white flash of his teeth. The glance of sunlight in his pale eyes. He butts out his smoke and flicks a rogue lock from his face. A person like this shines so bright, like Veronica. Like McNamara. And a cold pit in my stomach forms when I realise that he’s too embedded in this world.

“I want you to be okay because I care about you. It’s as simple as that.” Hudson says, bumping his shoulder into mine. He gives me a toothy smile that makes his eyes crinkle. “It’s pretty straightforward, ain’t it? Or do I gotta keep on with the mushy shit—”

“I understand,” I say, quickly. “I get it.” I don’t. But I give him a tight smile anyway and his grin widens.

“You don’t ruin people, Dino. In fact, I’d say you have the opposite effect.”

Pretty words are pretty words. “Oh, sure,” I drawl. “Gandhi in a trenchcoat. That’s what they call me.”

He chuckles. “The resemblance is uncanny. Sans the dhoti.”

“Know where I can get one?”

We piss around for a while longer, but my heart’s not really in it. And I think Hudson notices, because he doesn’t really push me. Once the conversation dries up, we head back inside and finish our work. We don’t say anything else after that. Don’t need to.

When the office block finally comes down, I feel worse than before. Like there’s C4 packed in my chest and everything just collapses inside me, reducing me to rubble and dust, and I can hardly breathe.

The rest of the week goes by in a haze. I float through the days like a ghost, only awake enough to act like a human being. Except, whenever I see Veronica, it’s like the very sight of her jump-starts my heart, and I’m living and breathing and battered by powerful, confusing emotion that’s entirely out of my control.

I try to speak to her. Try to rip the goddamn blinders from her eyes. But every fucking time I approach, a Heather or a Martha or a mouth-breathing jock gets in my way. *She doesn’t want to see you. She doesn’t want to talk to you. Leave her alone.* And then she gives me a complicated look, before turning on her heels, and I gotta watch her leave again and again and again—

Duke’s the queen hyena, baring her fangs at me with every win. There’s nothing sweeter to her than seeing me trampled in the dirt, in the muck, forced to pick myself up again and again

as she gleefully puppets Veronica like she does McNamara and her mutts.

By Thursday, after being caught unawares by Brad and Chad, I decide to resume our revolution.

The sun beats down on me as I curl up by the dumpster, clutching my throbbing stomach. Hot blood drips down my face and I can't move an inch without wanting to cry.

Veronica doesn't want anything to do with me or the revolution, because *she has no faith*. I have to show her that it can be done. I have to make her realise that it's the only way to change things - *really* change things. I have to inspire her. *Create a muse*.

That means, I have to keep going without her. Once she sees what kinda world I can create - *we* can create - she'll come back to me. And our love, our work, will be divine.

Our muse, Heather Duke, lives in a veritable mansion, albeit not as garish as Chandler's. There is consideration in the design and in another life, I might have even found it appealing. It's a 19th century sandstone build with multiple floors and a hundred windows, and swaddled by more acres than the eye can see. As I drift along with the party-goers making their way up the winding driveway, I stare at the sprawling estate in a daze, wondering at the sheer disparities in life.

I keep the hood of my jacket low over my face - for once, no trenchcoat - silently wishing that I'd brought along the pistol. One service pistol might escape notice, but two of the same kind? I couldn't risk the potential scrutiny.

A wired girl in neon hot pants bumps into me and she brays a laugh right in my face. I pause mid-step, staring at her blankly as she flips me the finger and races off to rejoin her friends. I'm not sure what I did to elicit such a response. By her laughter, I assume I'm the brunt of some unsaid joke.

It's familiar, that feeling. Like everyone knows something I don't - and I *should*, because it's obvious, but I don't. And the worst part is, I think even *Bud* gets it.

It doesn't take me long to find her. Veronica. She's standing in the kitchen, doing shots with Duke and her mutts off the vast marble counter. Deep, bassy music rattles through the house and the stink of weed and cigarettes effuse every breath. I keep to the kids mingling in the lounge, watching Veronica from a safe distance.

She's in a white blouse and signature blue skirt tonight, and her wild hair has been tamed in a French braid. Loose curls frame her flushed face, drawing focus to those big brown eyes that are so alight, like she's all fire inside and we're privy to a glimmer of it.

A painful clench in my chest erodes my will. This is dangerous. I'm here to push our revolution forward, and I'm already hesitating. Weak. *Pathetic*. A drunken asshole staggers past and I get a faceful of beer fumes and Bud's sneering in my ear, words like daggers to whittle me down—

Veronica raises her head and our eyes lock across the room.

I can't hear her, but I see her mouth my name.

JD?

I'm frozen to the spot. Cold sweat breaks out. Another drunk knocks into me and Bentley's spare glasses fly off my face. Disappear under countless, careless feet. I quickly yank the hood over my face and spin around, searching wildly for an escape route.

"JD!" A delicate hand grabs my own, an urgent hold, staying my escape. "What are you doing here?"

Panic spikes, sharp and sour, and I wrench my hand out of hers. I don't run. *I can't*. She's got me trapped with her accusatory glare.

I press myself against the wall, trying to preserve the precious space between us. And to her credit, Veronica keeps her distance.

She folds her arms and raises a brow. "JD?"

"It's a party," I shrug.

A flicker of uncertainty. "Are you following me?"

"Like I don't have anything better to do?" I sneer, and she flinches at my tone.

"*Jesus*. Don't tell me you've *actually* gone Night Stalker on us." Heather Duke, flanked by her mutts, saunters to Veronica's side, exasperation written all across her glittery face. "Did you really think we wouldn't be able to see through that disguise? You're like a black turd in a neon pool. Do better next time."

Mind numbing rage envelops. It takes every scrap of willpower to hold myself back and my hands ache from how tightly I keep them furled.

"Veronica—" I start, but Duke interjects.

"No, you talk to *me*." Her tongue is as sharp as her glare. "Veronica doesn't want anything to do with you. So if you have something to say, you say it to me."

I bite the inside of my cheek hard enough to draw blood. My eyes remain fixed on Veronica. Duke is non-factor. "I'm sorry," I say, and I try to mean it. "I just want to talk to you. Alone. Can I see you later tonight?" I brave a step forward, hands held out for her to take.

Something wavers in Veronica. Her anger wanes. A soft hesitation burgeons.

Duke notices and she sics her mutts onto me. Two meaty hands grab me by the upper arms. I grit my teeth and struggle against their bruising hold, but they're twice my weight and size. It's like fighting against two incredibly stupid boulders.

“I don’t know what you think has happened,” Duke continues, caustically. “But Veronica dumped your ass. You’re an ex. A bad memory to use as a reference for future dates. And you’re going to stay that way.” Her expression turns jagged. Mean. “Did you really think it would last? A washed up loser like you? You should be thankful she even deigned to play along with your edgy little fantasy. But now, it’s time to wake up. You’re done, JD.
Finished.”

I rear my head back and slam it into the closest skull. Brad staggers back with a howl, hands clutched over his brow. I don’t hesitate. Use my free hand and drive it into Chad’s stomach. The jock doubles over, his grip loosens – but just as I try to make a run for it, his giant fingers tighten. They wrench my arm back, yank it up my spine, and I’m violently shoved into the ground.

My temple strikes polished wood. Vision flashes white. Pain arcs from my restrained arm and through my head, and I can’t move a muscle without Chad tightening his hold.

I push panicked pants through clenched teeth, struggling to stay grounded, even as Bud Dean leans his full weight against me, crushing every bone in my body with terrifying ease. “*See how they look at you, Jason. You’re vermin. Filthy vermin that needs to be exterminated.*”

Veronica’s voice interrupts Bud’s tirade. “Chad, *let him go.*”

A muscular arm wraps around my neck in a chokehold, forcing my head up. I can see Veronica, gazing down at me with concern. No, with *scorn*. Her mouth twists into a cold smirk and she spits out, “*You might have your mother’s face, but you are every bit your father’s son.*”

And I’m being dragged through the opulent hallway, past dozens of faces I never bothered to learn, and they’re all staring at me, smirking, jeering, a chorus of taunts that unravels me so completely, “*I won’t ever become like you, I won’t ever become like you, I won’t ever become like you, I won’t ever become like you—*”

I land on the perfectly mowed lawn and I lie there, curled around my hurts, feeling the emerald green undulate beneath my body like groggy waves. By the time I unfurl, everyone’s back inside or returned to their drinks, and I’m already lost to the better impressions of the night.

My heart’s pounding in my ears so loud, my head aches. The rage surges but it has nowhere to go, so it just hangs there, listless, petrified, *helpless*. I could punch someone or let loose a scream and it’ll still be there, confined in my chest like a toxic cloud, and all I can do is choke to death and the world will keep on. The world will keep on and nothing will change.

I drag myself to my feet and flit my gaze over the house. I spot a window to the far left, overlooking the koi pond. There’s a diamante whale ornament glittering on the window ledge. An invitation, if I ever saw one.

With no-one paying mind to my presence, I swiftly make my way into the backyard where the people are sparse. In fact, there’s only a couple of stoners here, preoccupied with THC-induced existentialism. Threat level, on par with trees.

I ignore their dazed invites to join their intoxicated musings and shimmy up the drainpipe. My boots slip on the plastic every so often, but I manage to keep a good grip on the pipe. A fall could mean failure - and I only have one shot at this.

As expected, Duke's bedroom extends the full width of the house. It's almost too easy to unlock the latch on her back window with my pocket knife and slip inside.

I pause before closing the window, peering down at the stoners lolling in the middle of the yard. One of them points to the sky and their chortles drift up to the second floor. Releasing a breath, I slide the window close and glance around the room.

For a moment, I think I've got the wrong place. Then I notice the bold green theme and there's no doubt that this is Heather Duke's bedroom. Framed certificates, golden trophies, plaques, ribbons, shields, tens of photos of Duke posing at award ceremonies - they fill every inch of every wall space. It's eerie and a little deranged like I've stepped into a museum of Duke's accomplishments. It should be inhumanely impossible for one person to collect this many awards, but then again, Duke isn't human.

I slowly pace through her room, studying these dizzying displays. In every photo of Duke, there stands her parents. Mr. and Mrs. Duke on either side, smiling widely, swelling with pride. Their daughter, on the other hand, is frowning. Her lips are tugged back. Her eyes narrowed. And there's a deep sense of dissatisfaction, or anger, in her face. And I know this expression well, because I see it on my own face whenever I look in a mirror.

By the time I reach her desk, my eyes have adjusted to the dark - and I see it. *Pure destruction*. Scattered golden metal, splintered wood, torn ribbons, the debris of Duke's successes displayed upon her desk like it's the treasured centrepiece. And scrawled on the wall above in bold red lipstick, two words:

FUCK YOU

I stand there, frozen, staring at those jagged red words. I'm hesitating. Off-kilter. Because while I recognise this anger, I don't recognise this girl. *Fuck you*. A blatant act of defiance and yet confined to this room. The only audience, its creator and, well, *me*.

My eyes snag on a familiar flash of blue. A scrunchie, sitting in a pile of polished wood chips. Head spinning, I pick it up and bring it to my face. Floral shampoo and cigarette smoke. *Veronica*.

And then it clicks in place. I can see what transpired here.

Duke and Veronica, drinking on her bed, an odd ceasefire in their cold war, chatting and laughing in their pantomime friendship. Then Veronica asks the hard questions. Blunt. Rude. And painful. Because that's what she does. She likes to catch you unawares, wrangle the truth right out of you. And Duke, she'd have fallen for it, because she doesn't know Veronica like I do.

Veronica suggests rebellion; a hangover from her time with me. Duke, she agrees - because again, *it's Veronica*. They grab the biggest, shiniest trophies and plaques and fling them

against the wall, whooping and cheering with every impact. And then, Veronica takes the lipstick from Duke's dresser and says with a crooked grin, "Write what you want to say to them." Inspired, Duke snatches the lipstick and crawls onto her desk and she attacks the wall like she's homicidal: FUCK YOU.

I can hear them. Screaming in unison.

"FUCK YOU! FUCK YOU! FUCK YOU!"

And it's exhilarating. It's maddening. Because all of that is Veronica and her brilliance, and Duke - undeserving Duke - is given a glimmer of it.

Grinding my teeth, I yank Veronica's scrunchy onto my wrist. Calloused fingers linger on the soft material. They lift a strand of brown hair and it's like silk, cutting into my flesh as I wind it around my forefinger.

"Oh." A soft voice, a near sigh, sends an arc of lightning through my body.

I whip around to see McNamara in the open doorway, orange hallway light spilling inside. Her wide eyes, shocked and bright, catches on my own, and she must have seen something in them because she immediately slams the door shut behind her.

"JD," she says, breathlessly. "I didn't expect to see you here."

I clench my fist, rapidly alternating between wanting to throttle her or throwing myself out the window. "Of course you didn't. Why would you?"

"Oh, yeah." McNamara laughs weakly, clutching at her arm. "That woulda been weird, huh?"

"So?"

"So...what?" she blinks, stupidly.

"So, what are you going to do?"

"Uh..."

"Are you gonna tell Heather about this?"

She frowns, brows knitted together. "...No. I know why you're in here."

It's my turn to blink. "You do?"

"It's okay. I'm here for the same reason."

The gears in my brain creaks to a stop. *Wait. What?*

There's a hysterical moment when I see McNamara aiming a gun at Duke, a callous look on her face as she eagerly pulls the trigger—

“You don’t do good at parties too, huh?” McNamara continues, moving to sit on Heather’s plush four poster bed. She leans back on her hands and kicks her heeled feet in the air.

“What do you—” My voice cracks midway. I try again. “What do you mean?”

“I get weird when there’s too many people around. Well, mostly loud drunk people. So I come up here to get away.”

I glance at the nearest window. If I make my escape now, it’ll arouse suspicion. Even someone as stupid as McNamara would know that something’s amiss. She might even rat on me to Duke. No, I gotta make it seem like I belong here. Like we’re...friends.

I sit down beside her. The bed dips under my weight and she almost rolls into me, but she catches herself with a laugh.

“You’re a Heather. You’re supposed to like parties,” I say, impassively.

She purses her glossed lips. “Sure. That’s what everyone thinks.”

“If you don’t like parties then why go to them?”

“Heather wouldn’t let me miss a party. Especially one of hers. Anyway, it’s more than just drinking and hanging out. It’s like a way to stay popular, you know?”

“No, I don’t,” I say, flatly.

McNamara giggles. “It’s just something I can’t not do.” McNamara gives me a smile that crescents her eyes and my stomach flips. She shouldn’t be giving me that kinda smile at all.

She hums and twirls a finger through her long ponytail. I watch her silently, unsure what to make of her. Out of all the Heathers, McNamara was the one who’d mystified me. She acted the part sure, but she wasn’t as good as the other two. Not as smart or pristine or as strong. There were cracks in her performance. Flaws. The kind that makeup and bright clothes can’t cover up.

I decide to probe, out of simple curiosity. “Why did you do it?”

Heather glances at me, head tilted. “Do what?”

“Kill yourself. Or try to, at least.”

Her lips pop open in a surprised ‘o’. Eyelashes flutter, like she’s struggling to process my question. She drops her gaze to her feet and the colour drains right out of her.

I almost get up to make my escape, when she finally replies. Her voice, quiet yet steady. “I couldn’t see anything else. At the time, dying was the only thing in front of me, and I couldn’t go anywhere but forward.” She laughs shakily. Gives me a tight-lipped smile. “It’s dumb. I don’t know how to explain it properly. I’m not good at words like Heather is.”

I pinch the scrunchie around my wrist, rubbing the fabric between my fingertips. There's a real temptation to shoot her down. Crush her under my boot like Duke might. But the look on her face seems real, and I think about how Veronica coaxed McNamara out of the bathroom. How they both shined.

So I raise a shoulder in a noncommittal shrug. "Makes sense to me."

Heather's eyes widen. "It does?"

"Sure. Think you're the only one who's tried?"

There's a short, tense pause. "I guess I'm not surprised."

"Thanks," I say, sardonically.

"You're welcome," Heather beams. "Anyway, you failed didn't you? Like I did."

"That's a comfort."

"Right? Thanks to Vee, I know that there's other options. She told me that if I killed myself, then I *really* would have been trapped. Death is forever and that's a certainty. But in life, certainty doesn't exist, which *sounds* scary, but it really isn't. Even if I feel trapped right now, there is always a chance of escape."

"Veronica said that, did she?"

"Vee is so smart. I think she's even smarter than Heather - and Heather's read like...*a thousand* books." She pauses, when she sees me stiffening. Her smile disappears. "Oh. Sorry, JD. I forgot you guys broke up."

"We didn't break up," I grunt, averting my gaze.

"Well...nothing's ever a certainty, right?" It's repulsive. I can hear pity in her voice, like she thinks I'm desperately holding onto hope when there is none.

A slender hand touches my arm and I flinch away, sending a glower in her direction.

"Promise me you won't do it?" she says, earnestly.

I feel uneasy. Sick. I rock to my feet and pace a good distance away from the bed. Away from McNamara.

"JD?"

"I'm still here, aren't I?" I growl, irritated. "Apparently I'm terrible at dying."

Heather pushes out a breath and her mien relaxes. "Okay. Okay. I'm just making sure. I think Vee would be mad at me if I didn't try to stop you, you know?" She goes back to twirling her hair mindlessly with that dumb smile on her face. "How many times have you tried?"

I stare at her. Silent. Debating whether to respond. Maybe it's because talking to her is like talking to an empty conch shell - I don't feel like my words will go anywhere. So I indulge her. Just this once.

"Three," I admit in a monotone. I keep my expression just as flat.

McNamara intakes sharply. Brings her hands together in her lap to wring. "Wow. That's a lot. I've only tried once. And that was like, last week."

"Yeah. I was there."

She hums nervously. "What made you wanna do it?"

"I dunno. What made you wanna do it?"

"You can't have my reason. That's *my* reason. Anyway, you don't care about other people. Or what they think of you. That's kinda your whole deal. Maybe that's why no-one wants to talk to you? Except me, I guess. And those AV geeks you hang out with."

I know it's the truth, but coming from McNamara feels *wrong*. "What about you?" I snap. "Are you going to keep being Heather Duke's footstool? Isn't she the reason why you downed mommy's sleep aids?"

McNamara's face becomes pinched. Like I just jabbed her in the guts. "I'm not her footstool. I'm not gonna let her be mean to me again. Vee says she'll help me."

Vee this and *Vee that*. Jesus fucking Christ, it's like *they're* the ones in a relationship. I crack my jaw and quash down the verbal arsenic rising in my gullet. "And if '*Vee*' can't? She won't be there for you every time Duke decides to get nasty. What'll you do then? Down another bottle of pills?"

"No, I won't!"

"Then what's your plan? What is a footstool like you going to do against the demon queen of Westerburg High?"

McNamara bows her head, brows knitted heavily. I can't tell if she's angry or desperately thinking up a plan, but I don't care at this point. I've enough of this pointless conversation and I start across the room, towards the back window.

Heather rises from the bed, pale and determined. I pause, watching her every move.

She pads to the closet and drags it open. Kneels down to rummage around in a box. Eventually, she pulls out a thick album and sets it down on the bed. Heather flips through it quickly, with purpose. She knows exactly what she's looking for.

And when she finds it, she slips it out of the protective sleeve and hands it to me. A photo.

I take it, eyeing her warily. "What is this?"

Heather's eyes hold a knowing glint. Like she can see straight through me. "That photo is how I stop being a footstool."

I glance down at the photo. Angle it towards the moonlight streaming in through the window. I can make out two kids in a bathtub, near drowning in bubbles. One of them has a toy whale in her chubby hand. The other child wears a pair of goggles - or glasses - and she's hugging a blue boat. Even though they're both toddlers, I can tell exactly who they are.

"Holy shit," I laugh, delirious. "Heather Duke and Martha Dunnstock?"

McNamara giggles. "Apparently they were *best friends* up until middle school. I guess Heather made Martha keep quiet about it because no-one knows except me and—well, Heather knew about it too but she's dead now. So it's just me."

"And me," I add, staring down at the treasure in my hand. An idea rapidly begins to form. "Why did you give this to me?"

"Because I think you'll know exactly what to do with it. I mean, the photo's great. But even if I showed other people, Heather's just gonna make it all go away. I think you can come up with a better plan." McNamara sidles up to me, expectantly.

I lean back, maintaining the space between us. "What do you want me to do with it?"

She shrugs. "Find a way to make Heather my friend again. She's not the demon queen of Sherwood. She never should have been. If I get my friend back, then everything will be okay."

"You trust me?"

"Sure. Why wouldn't I? I mean, I know you're not together anymore, but Vee says you're a nice guy. And she's right about a lot of things."

I slide the photo into my jean pocket. "A nice guy, huh?" I give McNamara a wide smile, one that mirrors hers. "Don't worry. I'll make sure you get your friend back."

I won't. I couldn't give a shit about McNamara's futile quest.

What I've got in my pocket is the nuke to my trigger. The very instigator of real, earth shattering change.

I realise now that I've been thinking too small. So far, I've limited my revolution to Sherwood, Ohio, when I'd missed this simple truth: *there are assholes everywhere*. Not just in Westerburg High. Not just in this shitty backwater town or redneck state. The *entire fucking world* is teeming with parasites that need to be culled.

And the world as it is accommodates these parasites. Rewards them, even, for their deplorable behaviour. The more lives you ruin the higher you climb. The higher you climb the greater the rewards. Those who don't want to play the game - the good and the honest - are forced to survive as bottom feeders, eternally doomed to be fodder for the parasites above.

There's only one way to completely eradicate the parasites. A tragedy, big enough to incite a revolution; horrendous enough to incite the end of society as we know it. From the rubble, the good and the honest will rebuild the world to their design. The perfect utopian blueprint.

And it all comes down to this one photo. A snapshot of two kids, eternally frozen in their happy ignorance; unaware of their fates as martyrs of the new world.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, friends!

I'm very sorry for the long wait. Things have been very stressful at work and mental health stuff has been difficult to navigate. But I've had a bit more time to write lately, so I'm trying to get back into the swing of things.

You might have noticed that the writing in this chapter is clumsy and not of the same quality as the others...

Also, I wasn't able to dive too deep into JD's psyche. I think I was just impatient to get this update out lol

I'll do my best to produce something better for the next chapter.

I hope the section about Heather Duke and Veronica's little rebellious party wasn't too jarring. I like to think that the world outside of JD's toxic bubble exists and all the characters have their own stories and interactions going on in the background. In this scene, I imagined Heather and Veronica setting aside their differences and connecting on a real, human level. Maybe even becoming friends? Who knows :P

Oh, and is Heather Mac too out of character here? I have no idea! But she is a cinnamon roll and I love her ^^

Anyway, I hope you enjoy this chapter and please let me know what you think!

P.S. The next chapter is called 'Kindergarten Boyfriend', so there's a small hint of what to expect ;u;

Chapter 22: kindergarten boyfriend

Chapter Summary

blackmail, a bridge, and a quiet epiphany

Chapter Notes

CW: Explicit language, explicit description of a suicide attempt, suicidality, emesis, mention of disordered eating, alcohol abuse/alcoholism, mentions of physical abuse, PTSD/anxiety.

If you or anyone you know is struggling with suicide or suicidal thoughts, please contact your local emergency services and seek help.

International suicide prevention resources can be found here:

<https://blog.opencounseling.com/suicide-hotlines/>

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Duke narrows her eyes when I slide the envelope across the bench.

“Consider it payment,” I say. “For a small favour.”

She gives me a sharp look, dagger-like incredulity, before snatching up the large envelope.

We’re in the science lab, which is empty during lunch, and the demon queen deigned to give me a private audience when I left an anonymous note in her locker. A confession, consisting of a quote from her favourite author: *‘In this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a scared white doe in the woodlands.’*

As expected, she turned up one minute before the requested meeting time. Upon first glance of her ‘secret admirer’, like the changing of tides, anticipation and curiosity quickly gave way to scorn.

I hope to god this is an ambush, she said, tapping her perfectly manicured nails against the lab bench. *Or a very unfortunate coincidence.*

It’s been a few days since my disastrous infiltration into Duke’s petri dish of a party, and for all my efforts, I’d only managed to widen the already impassable chasm between Veronica and me. Her glances are cool, distant, which is miles worse than anger or revulsion. She

looks at me like a Heather might, and I can do no more than stare back dumbly, oscillating between hate and love and everything in between.

Ever since I pointed the gun at her, I've been living like a soul rend all ways; three states of time, two states of being, and countless faces made bespoke for every stranger's glance. I see Veronica and she is everything I know and nothing I know, and it hurts so bad I gotta switch my brain off and run through the plan – *our revolution* – over and over like I'm chanting Pancasila.

"Fuck."

The expletive draws me out of my churning thoughts. Duke's clutching the photo – a photocopy – with both hands, eyes bulging out of their sockets.

"How the fuck did you get this?" she hisses, shooting me a panicked glare.

"I have my sources."

Her painted mouth purses. "You stole it. During the party. You utter shitstain."

I hop onto the bench to sit, one leg swinging over the edge. The space between us rapidly shrinks, and I can smell her perfume from here. It's spiced, complex.

Duke leans back on her heels a bit, but she doesn't flinch away from my close proximity. Instead, she raises her chin and glares at me with her usual arrogance. "You're showing me this for a reason, I presume?"

"You presume correctly."

"Blackmail? *Seriously?*" She rolls her eyes and balls up the photo within her palm. "Well, *go on then*. Make your demands. We only have ten minutes until the bell."

"You're organising the pep rally next week."

Duke raises a fine brow. "If you misplaced your pom poms, sorry – we're fresh out."

"I can get you Big Fun."

She stares at me like I've sprouted a second head.

I grit my teeth. "The band. Big Fun—"

"I know who they are," Duke snaps. "I'm just shocked you do."

"Kinda hard to miss when it's all there is on the radio."

"You listen to the radio?"

"Big Fun," I repeat, impatiently. "Do you want them or not?"

“Yes, I want the hottest band to play at our shitty pep rally. But there’s no way in hell that’s ever going to happen.”

“It can. I mean, I know someone who can make it happen. My uncle Sammy works at MTV. He’s got a line in with their manager who owes him a favour.” The lie comes out smoothly, easily, just like I’d rehearsed a thousand times in my head.

“You think I’m a moron like Heather and Heather, don’t you?” She tosses the balled up photo at me and promptly turns on her heels to leave.

“It’s for Veronica!”

Duke stills, one hand on the door. She glances over her shoulder and I see her anger replaced with something...softer. Hesitant. The demon queen pushes out a sharp breath and turns to face me, arms folded.

I slide off the bench and plant my hands on the edge. “...I know I fucked up.”

“How reductive.”

“Fucked up majorly.”

“So you get her favourite band to play at the pep rally and everything is forgiven? Are you *concussed*?”

“I’m not doing this to get her back.” I inject a waver to my voice. Put on a good show. “I just...want to give her something good. In the muck of the year that’s been, I want her to have a memory she’d wanna keep. In lieu of the bad. *Me*, I mean.”

Duke intakes slowly through her nose. She steps towards me and her high heels click against the linoleum. “I don’t like you, JD,” she says, bluntly. “I don’t like people like you. You’re creepy. Calculating. Egocentric. Always hiding your true intentions behind bad imitations of a smile.”

I start, said bad imitation falling right off my face. Nascent anger gnaws at my spine. “What are you talking about—”

“*But*,” she snaps, cutting me off. Another deep breath through her nose. “I made a promise with Ronnie. And part of that promise entails ‘hearing people out’. So. This is me. Hearing you – *god*, this is the *fucking worst* – hearing you out.” She takes one look at my shell-shocked expression and sucks her teeth in irritation. “So lay it out for me, Bela Lugosi. What do you want?”

I regard her with no small amount of confusion. There is Duke’s usual insufferable boldness sans the venom. I recall the angry FUCK YOU scrawled across Duke’s bedroom wall in red lipstick, and I think that maybe those two words had more significance than I’d initially ascribed.

I don’t like it.

Quelling my unease, I clear my throat and produce a sheet of paper. “My uncle can get Big Fun – as long as he can spin it as a marketing ploy. To do that, we need to start a petition.”

Heather picks up the petition and glances over it, boredly. “We petition. Make a lot of noise. Maybe ham up the Westerburg Suicides–”

“Uncle Sammy calls in the favour–”

“And sweet Ronnie gets her Big Fun Pep Rally Extravaganza.” Duke folds the petition and tucks it into her handbag. “I’ll bite,” she says, coolly. “But if you’re lying to me, I will ensure that *every tumorous speck* of you is cut out of Westerburg.”

“If I’m lying to you, the only thing you lose is a fraction of your time. Think about it, Heather. What better way to test your sovereignty than getting a thousand signatures by the end of the week? A rally of devotion for the Queen of Westerburg.”

Duke doesn’t look impressed. “Don’t be a kiss ass.”

“Your promise to Veronica. What is it?”

Her hard expression cracks. There’s a rare emotion that seeps through like ground water in a sun-baked desert. “A promise I intend to keep,” she says curtly, and I know it’s a petty strike at me; at all my ostensible failures. And I’m about to bite back, acid on my tongue, when she continues speaking – this time, with less vitriol. “I know what I am. I’m a bitch. And a damn good one too. Normally, I would relish the title, but then Heather tried to kill herself during assembly.”

I raise a brow. “Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“No,” she snaps, but there’s a tightness to her expression, as if she’s been caught out in a lie. “It’s just *my thing*. I rile. I burn. I push. Some people can take it. Some can’t. Heather’s always been in the former camp.”

“Until last week.”

She flicks her hair over a shoulder, gazing at me through lowered, glittery red eyelids. “I mean, she really shouldn’t take anything I say to heart. We’ve been best friends for two years for fucks sake.” Duke flattens her mouth. “Anyway. I guess she’s been extra sensitive or whatever since Heather killed herself. But I was pissed. She blurted out her bullshit in front of the entire school. At a televised assembly. *Obviously*, she was fishing for attention.”

“You may as well have given her the pills,” I say, dryly.

Duke rolls her eyes. “Don’t be so dramatic. It’s not like she needed any encouragement from me. But...” She shrugs and folds her arms tightly across her chest, a hesitation flitting across her features. “I probably should have kept my mouth shut. It wouldn’t be the Heathers with only one Heather.”

The fact that Miss You-Shut-Me-Up-And-I’ll-Shut-You-Down is ostensibly contrite renders me speechless. What the *fuck* did Veronica do? *Brainwash* the Heathers? Hypnotise them? Or

maybe she has her own set of incriminating photos held over their heads?

“That’s what happened on Friday night?” I say in disbelief. “Veronica made you promise - what - *not to be an asshole?*” Because that’s the *only* way to take down tyrants. Pinky swears and earnest promises.

I don’t buy it. There must be something more to it. Something else that happened that night. Veronica has wormed her way further into the Heathers’ social sphere – for *what?* Does she think falling into bed with the enemy is her best chance at escaping her destiny? There is a time when a revolution outpaces the firebrands; like the asteroid pulled into the earth’s gravitational field or the garden blooming spring-ripe, wild and untamed. Comparably, the Heathers are mere pebbles that Veronica has decided to stake her entire future on.

I never thought she could be so goddamn stupid.

“You threw me out on my ass three days ago,” I remind Duke, incredulously. “And now you wanna work with me?”

“What can I say? I’m Mother fucking Theresa.”

“People don’t change in three days.”

“A nuclear bomb could annihilate us in a second. Three days is an eternity.”

“A nuclear bomb is more likely.”

Duke meets my sneer with one of her own. “I’m trying to let go of my white whale. What about you?”

To that, I have no answer.

On my ride home, I slow to a stop beside Old Mill Bridge, a flurry of activity and flashing lights catching my attention. Hassled cops do crowd control for the curious onlookers jostling to get a good look at the scene. A gap opens up. And there, on the rocky shores of Sherwood River, is the battered body of Martha Dunnstock.

She’s wearing her ugly unicorn sweater, pink and garish, and her face is swollen blue – or maybe that’s just death. Around her, the rocks are piled up like she’s already in her coffin, halfway into the ground.

I glance at the bridge above and see Martha climbing over the rusted rails, clinging on with the last of her will. She impassively stares into the slow drifting waters, mind as blank as her face, and – without even a passing glance at the world she’s leaving – releases her grip and falls the impossibly long, impossibly short, three hundred feet.

The paramedics lift her onto a stretcher and a blue-black hand falls limply over the edge.

Bentley’s gonna cry, I think numbly. It’s revolting when he cries.

I kick my bike into life. Bentley's wails ring in my ears as I ride haphazardly to Tully's Ridge, near crashing at every red light.

Once there, I stagger off my bike and empty my guts, the foetid splatter coats my boots. I collapse against the barricade, heart pounding so loud, it's all I can hear.

It's just Martha. She was never going to see graduation. So why am I so damn *mad*? Like she's become *more* with one splay of the hand, and even if I flung myself off the Golden Gate, I could never amount to *Martha fucking Dunnstock*.

At this moment, sitting here with the dumb expanse of Sherwood pressing against my spine, I have never felt more insignificant. Never been more deficient.

A tight heat presses itself against the back of my eyes and squeezes the base of my throat.

Man up. Don't be such a candy-ass pussy. Don't be such a Jason.

But whatever courage I'd managed to summon, dissipates to the gelid winds of my cowardice.

I can't be distracted. I can't be shaken. Not like this. I just need to focus on taking one step after the other, because a single deviation will collapse the fragile scaffolding in my mind. And if it ever comes down, then *everything* will have been for nothing.

With trembling hands, I pull out my flask and take a long swig. The burning liquid washes down the acid in my throat. The late afternoon sun's hovering over the horizon, red and swollen, crackling heat across my clammy skin. But I'm still shaking like it's midwinter.

I sit there long into the night, drinking cheap whiskey until I stop feeling cold.

Bentley comes to see me during the first period the next day. I thought he'd be languishing for at least another few days, so I'm surprised to see him approaching my usual hookey spot behind the school.

There's a couple of stoners smoking nearby, and even they are unusually grim. A sweet haze drifts towards me with the occasional breeze, and I respond with a bitter cloud of tobacco smoke. Neither they nor I have stopped smoking since the first bell.

"Benson." I sit upright. I know I look a sight after my latest bender, but Bentley's no picture either with his puffy face and dark bags under eye.

"JD," he blurts, standing before me with clenched fists. He looks so damn miserable. And... *blubbery*. What the hell am I supposed to do if he starts crying? "JD. Martha. She-she—" His voice hitches.

"*I know*," I quickly interject. "I know. You don't gotta say it."

"I read her note." Bentley gives me a watery look.

“Nice of her to leave one.”

“I knew something was wrong. I just knew it. Last time we spoke...when-when we broke up—she was so...she was *frantic*. Maybe I should have listened to her.”

I narrow my eyes. “Listened to her about what?”

About you being an unhinged, cold-blooded murderer—

“About Ram. About what she was going through. I *knew* she liked him. It wasn’t a secret. But I never thought he mattered that much to her. But then, she started talking all crazy, and I just...I was such a dick to her, JD. And now she’s in hospital, and I—”

“She’s *what*?” The sharpness of my tone snaps him out of his wallowing.

He blinks at me, owlishly. “She’s...in the hospital?”

“She’s not dead?”

Bentley blanches. “*God, no!* Did you—did you think she was...? No, Martha’s not dead. She’s broken a few bones, but she’s alive.” He pulls in a shaky breath and gives me a watery smile.

Despite myself, a wry smile tugs at the corner of my mouth. Of course. *Of course* she’s alive. How could someone like Dunnstock do something so *absolute*? This must be a pathetic attempt at clawing back into Bentley’s life. A desperate, and frankly stupid attempt at taking one last shot at me before the inevitable happens.

Dunnstock can fight all she wants. For her efforts, she’ll only find herself in the perfect Martha-shaped slot I’ve designed for her.

“JD, can you give me a lift to the hospital? I’d take the bus, but I—well, I’ve never taken the bus before. And it’s a little daunting. Last time I took public transport, this woman *spat* on me. I think she had a knife on her too—”

I snuff my smoke out with a violent jab against the concrete. “Mommy too busy sloshing it up at the country club?”

He flinches, smile faltering. “She—well, she doesn’t know about Martha. I’m not supposed to have a girlfriend until after college.”

“What happened to banging coked up Harvard chicks?”

Bentley blushes, but there’s no anger. Just a sad, deflated look. “Please, JD. I have to see her.”

I tell myself I’m doing this to get out of school. Because it’s either this or wiling away the day by the dumpsters with Cheech and Chong and their two ounces of Columbian Gold. I also reckon I should make an appearance and remind Martha that there’s nothing she can do to waylay my plans. Give her a good, heart-stopping scare.

Despite his upset, Bentley's face brightens like he'd just won the lottery when I reluctantly grunt my assent.

My bike's been through the wringer, scratched up to hell and back, but the nerd acts like it's made of diamond by the way he gapes and stutters.

"I-I-I've never ridden one of these before. Do you have a helmet?"

"Nope," I say, straddling my bike. I glance at him dithering and stalling with accompanying hums. "Are you getting on, or should I visit your girlfriend myself?"

That gets him moving. He awkwardly climbs on behind me and clings onto my waist in twin death grips. "JD, JD wait – I don't think it's legal to ride without a helmet, is it? What if you crash? I heard that instances of fatalities are *very* high compared to regular vehicular accidents—"

I kick my bike into life and the roar of the engine drowns out his anxious babbling (and his subsequent screeching) as we speed out of the parking lot.

I don't like hospitals. Never did. Spent a lotta time in those white disinfected halls, and the nurses and doctors that regard you as little more than broken parts to weld and oil. I don't think Bud really likes them either, 'cus he never set foot in one, not even when I had my jaw wired shut after one of his tantrums.

The closer we get, the worse I feel, and by the time I pull up to the visitor's parking lot, I have to take a moment to stave off the nausea roiling in my guts. That's all I've been doing lately; purging what little food I'd managed to keep down, like my body's trying to rid itself of anything useful and good.

"You okay, man?" As soon as the bike rolled to a stop, Bentley clambered off the back as though his ass was on fire. He's staring at me now, wide-eyed, knees knocking into each other as he finds his sea-legs.

Instead of answering, I swing my leg over the bike and kick out the stand. "Let's go."

The sun disappears behind a thick padding of black clouds, and there's a distant brontide; ominously rumbling. A frigid wind snags our clothes as we quicken our pace through the parking lot.

By the time we reach the main entrance, the first drops of rain hit the pavement.

Sherwood General Hospital is bustling but it's not metropolitan busy, so the guy at reception greets us without hassle. He's all Sherwood Smiles and sympathetic nodding as Bentley chats to him but I don't really hear them.

Everything's blur and noise, and I'm just standing behind Bentley, clenching and unclenching my fists as I try to keep my breath steady. I can feel their eyes on me, every patient, doctor, nurse, visitor, even the goddamn janitor is eyeing me up like I'm about to go postal.

I've hyper-aware of my gun, tucked into my belt; the metal warm against my skin.

And then Bentley's loudly thanking the receptionist, and he grabs my arm, dragging me down a wide, white hallway, pungent with that stench all hospitals have—

“Do you know him?” Bentley asks, snapping me back to the present.

“What?” I stare at him blankly.

“The receptionist. You were looking at him like you wanted to kill him.”

I jab my elbow into his ribs and he almost stumbles into a pregnant woman who squawks at him to ‘watch where he’s going’.

“What was that for?!” he yelps.

“For leading us to the wrong ward. This is *maternity*. Unless, there’s something you ain’t telling me?”

Bentley sputters and turns red, mortification overwhelming his protest.

While Bentley visits his ‘Patsypoo’, I hang back outside in the hall. My mind churns feverishly with thoughts about Veronica, and I can’t keep still. I pace from wall to wall, earning several scathing looks from the nearby nurse’s station, but I need to move. I need to distract myself from the anger coating every breath, every skull-rattling pulse, and twitching muscle. I’m jonesing bad for the one thing I can’t have, and it’s driving me crazy.

Bentley steps out, flushed pink and shiny-eyed.

“You done?” I glance skittishly down the labyrinthine halls, looking for the exit.

“She—er...” Bentley blinks and adjusts his glasses. “She wants to talk to you.”

“*About what?*” It comes out harsher than intended.

“Something about making amends,” he shrugs and nudges me towards the door. “It won’t take a second.”

I almost turn on my heels and walk away, but Bentley’s staring at me with such big, expectant eyes, I just know he’s not gonna let this one go. I grit my teeth and shove open the door, bracing myself for the unpleasant conversation ahead.

“JD!” Dunnstock smiles and offers a little wave of her fingers. The rest of her arm is encased in stiff, white plaster, as are both of her legs. She looks like a gormless, bespectacled mummy. “Come in! You can sit down if you like.”

A muscle in my cheek twitches. “No, thanks.”

When I turn to close the door behind me, I catch Bentley grinning and giving me two thumbs up. There’s a bit of satisfaction when I slam the door shut in his face.

“Still alive, Dunnstock?” I stand at the foot of Martha’s bed, eyeing her as I light a cigarette.

“I don’t think you’re allowed to—” Martha starts, and then she cuts herself off and smiles. “Nevermind. Thanks for coming to visit, JD.”

“I’m not here to visit. I’m his ride.”

“Well, thank you regardless—”

“What do you want?” I interject, gruffly.

She intakes shortly and presses her lips together. Her eyes flit over me, like she’s trying to pick me apart with sight alone. “I really do like him,” she says, quietly.

“Coulda fooled me.” I start sauntering around the room, inspecting the boring, vapid paintings of landscape that I’ve seen in ten different states. I’ll probably never see them again.

“What do you mean?”

“If you like him, why did you jump?”

“Benny has nothing to do with that.”

I glance at her, flicking ash on the polished linoleum. “Why’d you jump, Dunnstock?”

She opens and closes her mouth a few times, looking increasingly helpless. Eventually, she says, rather simply, “Ram.”

“You tried to kill yourself because of a kindergarten crush?”

Martha doesn’t react to my jeer. She just picks at the edge of her cast, pulling the fibres loose. “Do you remember what it was like back then?”

“No,” I say, flatly.

“Well, I do. We didn’t have any responsibilities. No pressure to be anyone or anything. We could play pretend and live in fantasy every single day. And everyone was *kind*. Even when we were mean to each other, we were kind. Ram...he was a part of that. But when he died, I realised I won’t ever be that happy again. Kindergarten, Ram, the kiss on the kickball field. I won’t ever get that back. So I thought, what’s the point? Why should I try so hard to live when I’m only getting further and further away from the happiest I’ll ever be?”

Martha glances out the window and I follow her gaze. A storm rages on outside, sky smudged purple and a torrential rain lashing against the glass. From here, it looks like another landscape painting. Distant and pretty. An echo of a memory.

“I regret jumping. I regretted it as soon as I let go of the railing. When I was falling, I kept thinking about Benny and Veronica and what more I could have done with them. Even if it’s not kindergarten, it’s still *precious* to me. It’s Saturday night scrabble and Princess Bride and

afternoons at the AV Club. Ram's not here anymore, but everyone else *is*. And I...I somehow forgot."

"Saturday night Scrabble?" *What in the hell is that?*

She laughs, startling me. "I suppose happiness looks different when you're older. It's *quieter*. Sometimes it's so quiet, it's easy to miss."

I think about lying in Veronica's bed with my arms wrapped around her, listening to the midnight radio as we talk about Heather Duke's latest bitch-scapades and make wild speculations about why there's a new lunch lady every week ("They're *obviously* spies, JD, sent from the CIA to MKUltra the school.").

I take an aggressive drag of my smoke before jabbing it out in a potted plant.

Martha's eyes track me across the room, following my restless path with an oppressive calm. "Anyway," she says, lightly. "I wanted to apologise to you."

"Apologise for what?"

"For what happened at the AV Club. And...well, it sounds crazy in hindsight, but I thought – just for a moment – that you might have had something to do with Ram and Kurt's suicide. I was just so sad and hurt and I think I wanted to blame someone for what happened."

"You..." My voice becomes hoarse. Words turn to static until I clear my throat. "You thought I killed them?"

"I was convinced after your fight with Bentley. The way you were acting...it really scared me. But Veronica came to see me this morning and she explained everything."

I drop down into the vacant chair, limbs become stone.

"She told me that it was the anniversary of your mom's passing. My mom's gone too, so I get it. I'm not right on her birthdays either."

I glance up at Dunnstock, surprised. "How did your mom die?"

"She got really sick a few years ago and she never got better." Martha gives me a tight smile.

I get an inkling of what she's feeling. It's the same way I feel whenever someone brings up mom - like I haven't time to put my armour on before they start hacking away at my bare flesh. And I gotta act like nothing hurts. Like I never needed the armour in the first place.

"I know that you were with Veronica the night Ram and Kurt died," Martha continues, "getting Slurpees at the 7-Eleven. I'm sorry, JD. My nan says I get too swept up in fantasy, and I guess in this case she was right. I hope - well, I don't blame you if you don't - but I hope we can still be friends."

I hunch over, pushing the heel of my palms into my eyes. I'm running on alcohol fumes and my brain isn't equipped to deal with this. But beneath all the confusion and suspicion, there's

a single mote of hope. A glowing ember of realisation that *Veronica still loves me*. If she doesn't, if she really is just another Heather and I a bad memory, then why would she have *protected* me?

Veronica believes in our revolution. I haven't lost her. Not yet.

Maybe Martha really isn't a threat anymore. Doesn't mean I can trust her, but she doesn't have to go by way of Ram and Kurt. Not before everyone else, at least. I can give her, and Bentley, that much.

I release a breath and it comes out a tad shaky. "You wanna be *friends*, Dunnstock?"

She must take my question as sincere because her face lights up like a goddamn Christmas tree. "You're my boyfriend's best friend *and* my best friend's boyfriend - and they both love you. Why wouldn't I want to be friends?"

"Veronica left me," I remind her, impassively.

"You don't have to be with someone to love them," Martha says, and she smiles at me like I'm stupid.

"How are you so..." *Intact*, I want to say.

As if she were telepathic, Martha says, "Because I'm a sucker for a happy ending. And if I'm gone, I won't ever get to know it."

On the way back to school, we stop by the 7-Eleven to fill up the tank.

Bentley dithers by the Slurpee machine, fascinated by the neon colours and the swirling icy sludge. When he tells me he's never had a Slurpee before, I automatically grab a cup and fill it to the brim with cherry slush.

I shove the giant cup into Bentley's eager hands and I reach over for another – but my hand hovers. I hesitate.

After a beat, I return the empty cup and head to the counter to pay.

By the time we pull into Westerburg, Bentley's tongue is stained red and he's noticeably happier.

Chapter End Notes

Welp. Here it is! I am SO SORRY I kept you waiting for so long. But I finally managed to push out this chapter!!

I don't know how I feel about it -- probably not my favourite chapter, although I did like writing a bit more about Martha ^^

Anyway, I hope the characterisations in this chapter made sense, and be warned that it's probably the last calm-ish chapter for this fic. There's only four more chapters to go and we all know what happens next.

Let me know what you think! The next chapter is called 'fight for me'.

Also, always wear a helmet when riding your bike! Motor or otherwise!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!