

It all Gets Buried in the End

By Sadie West

Fandom: *Riverdale* (Jughead + Betty)

I'm okay.

I'm okay.

I'm okay.

Jughead Jones tried to control his breathing as he repeated the mantra over and over in puffing whispers of breath.

I'm okay.

I'm okay.

I'm okay.

#

“This doesn’t make any sense.” Betty Cooper complained as she paced Archie Andrews’ living room, her blonde ponytail dancing nervously behind her.

Archie didn’t have a good answer for her. The note left in his locker at the end of school had no signature or telling marks. Just a plain piece of notebook paper written on in ballpoint pen.

To uncover your missing knight, you must speak to the troll under the bridge.

“Is this more of that griffins and gargoyles crap?” Archie asked, lifting the page from the sofa where Betty had left it. “What’s a missing knight?”

Betty was on her phone again. “Have you talked to Jughead since school? He’s

not answering me.”

Archie checked his phone. No messages. He tried calling his best friend, but the call went to voicemail, so he hung up and sent a text instead. *Call Betty. She's worried about you.*

“No, sorry,” he told her. “Nothing for a while.”

“I think we should follow the clue,” Betty said. “Even if it is a griffins and gargoyles task, I feel like we should check it out. The fact that Jughead isn’t answering and the note mentions our missing knight is giving me a very bad feeling.”

“Sure.” Archie shrugged. He had nothing better to do this afternoon since Veronica was busy at work. “Do you know what the clue means?”

“I think so.” Betty grabbed her purse and headed for the door. “There’s an antique store called the Stone Bridge behind the mall. I’m going to start there.”

“Okay. I’ll drive.”

Archie had never been to the Stone Bridge before. He wasn’t much of an antiques guy unless it had to do with cars, and the shop was a cottage-looking place that had seen better days. Inside the door, a bell tinkled and the scent of old things and dust wafted over him.

“Can I help you dearies?” called a friendly feminine voice from the counter in the back.

Betty marched across the shop with an unspoken tension in her shoulders. “Yes. Do you know the troll? Or where our lost knight is?”

The woman blinked in surprise. “I don’t think I understand,” she said, her voice

losing that friendly shopkeeper's lilt. "But you're welcome to look through my pewter figurine collection. There are some knights and such in it."

Betty pushed past Archie to a shelf behind the door. Rows and rows of pewter figures stood together. Fairies, dragons, castle towers, and maybe even a griffin or a gargoyle.

"This is it," Betty called out triumphantly, plucking a troll figure from the shelf. Turning it over, she found numbers drawn on the base in black marker. "I'll take this one," she told the shopkeeper.

Once back in Archie's car, Betty passed him the figure. "It's coordinates, I think."

"Our missing knight?" he guessed, not seeing much to get excited about. Jug was probably doing his father's bidding and had turned his phone off. Not a reason to panic. "Do you know how to read coordinates?"

"No," she said, tapping away on her phone, "but I can enter them in my maps app." After a few seconds, she looked up triumphantly. "Here. They lead to a spot by Sweetwater River. Feel like a drive?"

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Jughead kicked with all his strength at the bottom of the box. Whoever had knocked him out and sealed him up had taken his boots, but his heel was tough enough to splinter the wood. One more good kick and coarse soil trickled in.

It was as he'd feared.

Someone had buried him alive.

How long could he survive in a six-foot long coffin?

Think, he chastised himself. But all he succeeded in doing was make his head

hurt worse than before. He reached up to investigate the cut on the side of his head. The flesh was torn and tender, and his fingers only caused a deeper pain inside his brain. But the bleeding had stopped. All the blood he could feel on his scalp, collar, and the wood beneath him was dry.

He checked everywhere he could reach for his phone, his fingers scrabbling over untreated wood and bits of dirt.

Had he done this before? Had he already searched for his phone? Already tried to break free? His thoughts were so scattered, they were like shards of glass after a car accident. Nothing seemed to fit or make sense anymore.

How long had he been trapped in here?

Weakly, he pushed upward on the wooden box. Bits of earth rained down into his face.

“Help!” he screamed. “Help me!” The futile effort only stole his breath and caused black dots to bubble up in front of his eyes. “Help,” he gasped, a single tear forming at the corner of his eye.

They'll find me.

They'll find me.

I'm not going to die in here...

#

While Betty searched the clearing in the woods where the coordinates had led them, Archie stayed by the car, bored, though he wouldn't admit it to her. Griffins and gargoyles had never interested him. He'd much rather play a quick scrimmage or toss a ball back and forth than pretend he was a foreign prince fighting imaginary

dragons. But Betty's full attention was on the wild goose chase set before them.

"Archie!" Betty's panicked scream brought him upright.

"What is it?" he demanded, reaching her in three long strides.

Unable to answer, she thrust her phone at him. He scanned the message, locking one hand around Betty's upper arm. He wasn't satisfied yet they weren't under attack.

Fair lady, the text began, your brave knight is losing his breath. Uncover him quickly or his grave you'll find.

"What the hell is this?" Archie grumbled.

"It's from Jughead's phone," Betty panted, "but it's not him. Archie, you don't think..."

Suddenly, this stupid game seemed much more important. "You start calling everyone Jughead knows and find him in case this is some kind of a sick joke. I'm going to look around."

Betty took her phone back with trembling hands, and Archie investigated the clearing, while keeping an ear on her as she called F.P. first. Behind a tree, Archie found a pair of shovels covered in fresh clumps of dirt, and his stomach turned so violently, he thought he might double over and puke up his lunch. But he kept himself under control.

He tossed the first shovel near Betty for when she finished her calls, and he used his to test the ground, looking for a spot recently turned over.

#

Jughead lay still, too dizzy to move much. Every inhale was a labor, and every

puff of breath out made the spots dance. He rapped a knuckle against the side of the wooden box just to be certain he was still trapped because if he let his mind drift, as it was likely to do, he was in Betty Cooper's living room, lounging on her sofa, her head on his shoulder. If he closed his eyes, he could even hear the silly television show she loved to watch.

He blinked his eyes open, not sure how long he'd been dreaming.

The flashlight at his side flickered and dimmed. Was it a flashlight or his imagination? Or maybe it was his consciousness blinking out. Hard to tell.

"Juggy..." whispered Betty from his dreams. "Oh, my sweet Jughead."

His eyes drooped closed until he was back in the fantasy—warm, happy, and with the girl he loved.

#

Archie dug into the earth, swinging another scoop of dirt to the side. Again and again, his breath coming in gasps and sweat blossoming across his skin. He moved as fast as he could—*dig, swing, dig, swing*.

"You haven't seen him since this morning?" Betty repeated into her phone, pacing behind him. "Thank you. No. If you hear from him, please let me know right away." There was a scary silence as she called the next person in her contacts list. "Veronica?" she greeted in a panicked little voice. "Has Jughead been at Pop's today?"

Archie attacked the hole he stood in, widening it a little, stomping on the shovel blade to force it deeper into the ground. *Dig, swing, dig, swing*.

"Mom?" Betty was saying now. "Has Jughead come by the house today?"

Archie stomped the shovel into the bottom of his hole and hit something with a thud. "Betty," he called. "Hurry, I need your help."

She hung up on her mom and took up the second shovel. Together they uncovered part of a wooden box, but too much was still trapped under the ground to open.

"God damn it," Archie swore loudly. With Betty's help, he scraped and dug at the corners, expanding the hole, exposing most of the lid.

"Jughead?" Betty yelled, knocking once on the wood. "Are you in there? Can you hear me?" There was no answering knock. No raised voice. "We're right here, Jug. Archie and me. We're going to get you out."

With the tip of his shovel, Archie finally levered the lid off. With a squeal of bending nails, the lid flipped off and disappeared into the dark around them. For a horrifying moment, he just stared into the box. Under a dusting of earth was a corpse that looked a little like his best friend.

Betty screamed, one long terrible note, and then fell to her knees. The grief-stricken sound jerked Archie back to the present. Grabbing Jughead by the front of his shirt, he hoisted him out of the box and over the side of the hole, ignoring the dead weight or the way Juggy's arms and legs hung from his body like lifeless ropes.

While Archie climbed from the hole, Betty took Jughead's wrists and pulled him further out, then she was all over him, checking his pulse and breathing, straightening his filthy clothing, smoothing hair off his face.

"He's not breathing," she said calmly. "I learned CPR the summer I was a life guard. I'll do what I can."

Archie wondered if this was what shock looked like. Betty was appallingly at ease as she tilted Juggy's head back and pinched his nose closed.

Giving her a minute, Archie called 911 and spouted a brief summary of their problem. Then he pushed the speaker button and set the phone on the ground.

He'd never done CPR before, but he'd heard it wasn't very effective outside of a hospital. He wouldn't say that to Betty, but he kept the worst-case scenario spinning in his head. He touched Juggy's hand first, just to be sure this was real, and then he laid a palm to his friend's chest. He was warm. That was a good sign, but it didn't tell Archie how long Jug had been in that hole. Minutes? Or all day?

Betty forced three deep breaths into Jughead's open mouth, wiping tears from her face as she drew back. Archie leapt forward to help, finding the right spot on Juggy's chest and compressing his ribcage in a staccato rhythm.

"A little faster," Betty prompted.

When he glanced up, she was staring into Jughead's face, her hand stroking through his dark curls. Looking away quickly, Archie increased his pace, focusing on his friend's chest and trying not to think of the love and grief in Betty's eyes as she gazed at her boyfriend's pale, bloodied face.

Archie counted thirty compressions, and then Betty took over again. They continued the pattern over and over, well past the point Archie felt useful. But he wouldn't stop. For Betty's sake, if nothing else. Through her tears, she continued breathing for Jughead, and Archie was not going to be the person who told her to stop.

An ambulance finally found them, followed by the sheriff's vehicle.

“Keep up the CPR,” the first paramedic to rush over advised. “Tell me quickly what happened to him.”

Though it seemed pretty obvious to Archie, what with the open grave and all, he said, “Someone buried him alive and sent us clues to find him. When we pulled him out of the box, he was like this.”

While Archie continued compressions, the paramedic checked Jug’s eyes, pulse, and pulled up his shirt to set up sticky pads on his bare chest. “Do you know if he was given anything or if he took anything?”

“No.”

“You’ve done a great job,” he said, “but step back now and let us help him.”

The second paramedic arrived with a case of equipment and an ambu bag. They activated the defibrillator, Jug’s chest flinched once, and then nothing.

“Andrews, Cooper,” the sheriff called, forcing them further from Jughead and the gaping hole beside him. “I’ve got a question or two for you.”

“We’re just as confused as you are,” Archie assured, scrubbing tears from his face. When had he started crying? They both gave up their phones and the pewter troll to the sheriff. They were still trying to explain things when the paramedics carried Jughead away on a stretcher and shut him inside the ambulance.

“I want to go,” Betty began, lurching forward, but the vehicle was already pulling away.

“I’ll take you,” the sheriff promised. “We can talk more on the way.” He radioed for backup to secure the gravesite and then took Betty back by Archie’s house for the original paper note that had started everything, despite her teary protests. By

the time they arrived at the hospital, they couldn't see Jughead, and no one would even say whether he was alive or dead.

As time passed, more people drifted in to wait with them. F.P.. Veronica. Mrs. Cooper. Finally, a doctor appeared in the waiting room and spoke to F.P., though they could all hear the conversation in the cramped space.

"Your son suffered a concussion," the doctor explained, "and that coupled with oxygen deprivation left him in a coma-like state for the past few hours, but we've been administering the best care possible, and he's ready for visitors now."

At those words, Archie's heart twanged. Ready for visitors. Was that good news or bad? Was this a second chance for Juggy or a chance for them to say good-bye?

F.P. took hold of Betty and then Archie. "You're coming, too," he said, pulling them down the hall. "You saved his life."

Betty wasn't hesitant in any way. Her bouncing blonde ponytail disappeared into Jughead's private room, F.P. following a step behind. Archie, though, paused in the doorway, processing before he entered.

Jughead had been dressed in a cotton shift, washed, and stuck full of tubes and wires. He looked pale and rail thin under the white sheet, his hair shockingly dark. Purple bruises seemed very stark under both sunken eyes. An oxygen cannula lay across his face.

Betty kissed and stroked him, tucking in a sheet here, straightening chest leads there, while F.P. hung back around the foot of the bed.

"He's not awake yet," F.P. commented, sounding disappointed.

Betty either didn't catch his emotion or she ignored it. "I'm going to run over to

the gift shop and get some cheery balloons or something for when he wakes up," she announced. "So he'll have something nice to look at. This room is depressing." In a whirl of white shirt and yellow hair, Betty was gone.

F.P. sucked in a harsh breath and ducked his head. Horrified, Archie suspected the older man was holding back a sob.

"I need a minute," F.P. mumbled. "Stay with him until I get back, okay Archie?" Without waiting for confirmation, the man hurried out.

Suddenly, Archie was alone with Jughead. Nothing but the sound of medical machinery between them.

Feeling stupid standing in the doorway, Archie crossed to his best friend's bed and settled his hip on the edge of the mattress.

"I really wish you'd stop *almost* getting killed," Archie remarked as he scrutinized every bruise and scratch on Juggy's exposed flesh. "It's wreaking havoc on my nerves, dude."

Jug's right hand reached out blindly. Instinctively, Archie clasped it and squeezed. "I'm here, buddy. It's cool."

A pair of foggy, bloodshot eyes opened in slow motion, but didn't focus on anything in particular.

"Jughead?" Archie whispered. "You in there, pal?"

Juggy blinked once and seemed to gain a bit more clarity. "Arch?" he croaked.

"Yeah, man, it's me." He started brusquely rubbing his friend's hand until he realized he should be more gentle and settled for just holding his cold fingers. "How are you feeling?"

“Am I dreaming?” Juggy asked, a line appearing between his brows.

“This is real,” he promised. “You’re in the hospital, and you’re going to be fine.”

He prayed he wasn’t lying.

“I’m not here,” Juggy panted. The machine next to him sped up its series of *beeps* and *boops*. “I’m in a box. I’m not here. I’m in—”

Archie sensed a full-blown panic attack coming and impulsively did what he felt would calm his friend. He lay down in the bed, snaked an arm under Jughead’s shoulders, and pulled him tight to his chest.

“Breathe, man,” Archie said, rocking him a little. “Just breathe. You’re not in the box anymore. I got you out of the box. This is the hospital.”

“In the box,” Juggy sobbed against his throat.

“Shhhh,” Archie cooed, holding him gently and letting him cry. Crying was better, in his mind, than panic.

A couple minutes of quiet sobbing and Jughead’s body began to relax and grow heavier in his arms.

“That’s it, Jug,” Archie said. “Sleep. You’re safe.”

“Archie,” he sighed, and then seemed to breathe in Archie’s scent from the crook of his neck, maybe verifying this was real. “In a box...”

“You’re out of the box, man,” Archie swore. “I got you out. I found you.”

He heard a scuffle and looked up to find F.P. and Betty standing in the doorway staring at him, at least two dozen red and blue balloons trailing into the hallway. But Archie didn’t dare move and wake up Jughead. His friend needed to sleep and heal.

“Don’t move,” F.P. whispered.

“Yeah,” Betty agreed quietly. “Don’t disturb him.”

“He was panicking,” Archie whispered back. “I was only trying to calm him down. But,” he twisted to see into Jughead’s peacefully sleeping face, “I’m not getting up until he wakes by himself.”

Betty and F.P. exchanged a glance, but they both nodded. “Yes, of course.”

As Betty and F.P. found plastic chairs to settle into and wait, Archie exhaled deeply and settled in for a long nap.

Anna Abner lived in a haunted house for three years and grew up talking to imaginary friends. She married a tall, dark, and handsome United States Marine—her real life romance hero. Currently, she writes edge-of-your-seat paranormal romances and blogs about ghosts and magic from her desert hideaway in sunny southern California.

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