

Stranded

By Sadie West

Fandom: Riverdale (Archie + Jughead)

The weather had sent the girls home hours earlier, but Archie Andrews was determined to catch a fish before he left the frozen Sweetwater River. His best friend Jughead Jones agreed to stay with him until he had a fish on the hook.

"Sun's going down," Archie observed, squinting out of the ice fishing hut into all that white. White river, white ice, white snow, white sky. The only way he could determine dusk was where the glow of the sun moved in the sky behind the clouds.

"You ready to call it quits?" Jughead huddled in a camp chair, everything but his face covered in a blanket. He was always complaining of the cold, but then he never had a decent winter jacket. In the old days, Archie would hand down last year's nylon or wool coat to Jug, but it had been awhile since Jughead had appreciated the charity. Nowadays, he wouldn't accept it.

But Juggy had no idea how many nights Archie had lain in bed fantasizing about Jughead wearing his clothes, of smelling his scent, of somehow feeling Archie through the fabrics.

"I guess it's just not in the cards." Archie shrugged, and something magical happened with the simple movement. It caught the eye of a passing trout, and Archie felt a jerk on his line.

"Oh, crap," he exclaimed, gripping the pole with both hands. "I have a bite!" He grinned at Jughead who threw off his blanket and rushed to help Archie reel in the monster. Inch by inch, they pulled the fish up out of the icy water, splashing them both in the process, until it was near enough to the surface that Jug could sweep the net under it.

"He's a beauty," Jughead crowed. "Nice catch, Arch."

Archie flushed with excitement and pride. He knelt beside his friend, drew a

knife, and sawed off the struggling creature's head. This bad boy was plenty big enough to eat.

They made quick work of wrapping the dead fish in plastic bags, cleaning up their mess, and packing their gear in order to get out of the mountains as fast as possible. There was no cell service this far out due to the storm, but Betty and Veronica would be waiting anxiously for their return. And, to be honest, though Archie relished the time alone with Jughead, he was freezing his toes off out here.

"The car didn't seem so far away when we parked it," Jughead remarked, packing out the fish and his blanket.

Archie, carrying the fishing gear and a cooler, agreed. "It's past the trees and down the dirt road a ways." With the sun sinking lower and the wind picking up, it was getting damned cold. He started fantasizing about the heater in his dad's car cranked up to high.

At the car, they tossed their stuff in the backseat, jumped in, and sat shivering while Archie turned the key and waited for the engine's temperature to rise. The air hissing out of the vents wasn't close to warm for a good ten minutes, but they finally got rolling down the dirt road toward the two-lane highway that led home to Riverdale.

"You want to have a cookout when we get back?" Archie asked, leaning far into the steering wheel. It had begun to snow again, and he was having trouble seeing the road through the windshield even with the high beams and wipers on.

"And grill up your blue ribbon trout?" Jughead glanced at him from his spot hovering over the heater vent in the console. "You bet."

Archie caught his eye and smiled slightly. A friendly smile. An average, every day, best friend kind of smile that didn't hint of anything more than the love, admiration, and attraction any friend would feel for their platonic bestie.

That look, though, that handful of moments Archie's eyes were off the road, changed everything. When he glanced ahead of the car, he could see nothing but white. There was no shoulder, no lines, no difference between woods and road.

He jerked the wheel in panic. Was he still on the road? Had he careened into a field? Was he driving on the river?

The back wheels slid hard to the left, Archie attempted to correct it, but lost control and went off the edge with a sickening feeling of weightlessness. For a moment, nothing happened, and then the car hit the ground at an angle and rolled.

Archie wasn't sure how many times they rolled down the snowy embankment. It was too terrifying to take stock as he was flung one way and then the other, but he knew when they landed because the jolt rocked him hard against the wheel. The vehicle settled right-side-up with a hiss and a crunch of metal.

For a moment, Archie could do nothing more than test if he was really and truly alive. He could feel his feet, could move both arms, and could even see relatively well. He wasn't bleeding anywhere that he could tell. The worst injury might be the raw skin on his neck from the seatbelt. God, that was lucky. *He was so lucky.* Things could have turned out much worse. He swiveled in his seat to laugh with relief with Jughead and say something goofy like, "I thought we were gonna die," but the sight of his best friend froze him to the core.

Jughead slumped against the shattered passenger window while dark red blood painted the cracked glass and covered half Jug's face. Unconscious, his arms hung limp, his hands slightly curling at his sides, and his legs at uncomfortable-looking angles.

"Oh, no," Archie breathed, his breath a puff of white in the quiet car. "Jughead?" Afraid to touch him, he settled for laying a hand on his friend's shoulder. It was warm and solid. "Look at me. Jug? Wake up."

No response.

Archie needed to do something fast to help his friend. He tried his cell phone first, but still no service. He gently patted Jughead's pockets until he found his phone in his hip pocket, but it was useless too. No service meant no 911 call, no ambulance on its way, no help coming.

They were on their own.

Archie had to think fast. The windshield was smashed and cold air bellowed in through the jagged opening, making it too cold for them to stay in the car. He climbed slowly out of the vehicle, stiff and sore, but not complaining. All he could think about was getting his best friend to a safe place and warm so they could wait for someone to find them.

He scanned the snow banks, squinting through the fresh flurries. At the far side of the meadow, he spotted a small cabin. It might not even be in livable shape, but on the other hand, it could be snug and warm. He had to chance it.

Rounding the destroyed car, Archie had to high step it through deep pockets of snow.

“Jug?” He called, easing open the passenger door and catching Juggy as he sagged out of the car.

Jughead moaned.

“I know, buddy.” Archie unbuckled his seat belt and maneuvered his friend over one shoulder. Standing and settling the heavy weight, Archie grabbed his pack out of the backseat and his phone just in case he found service somewhere.

Jughead cried out several times during the difficult slog from wrecked car across the meadow to the cabin in the distance. By the time Archie stumbled into the unlocked door, red-faced and out of breath, Juggy was awake.

“Easy,” Archie said, “we’re here.” He set Jughead on his booted feet, and immediately, the teen’s face paled and his knees buckled. Archie kept him from slipping to the branch-strewn wood floor only by grabbing him by the jacket lapels. “Whoa.”

Carefully, he laid Jughead down, being gentle with his friend’s damaged head, and then explored the small space for anything that could be of use.

The two-room cabin smelled like a pack of wolves had been sleeping in it and there was no food or water, but Archie had a couple granola bars, some jerky, and a canteen of water in his pack. Luckily, there was a crate of web covered firewood near the cold fireplace and a tarp wadded up in the second

room.

Archie spread the tarp on the floor and then knelt at Jughead's side.

"Jug?" he said softly, shaking his shoulder.

If it weren't for the blood streaking the right half of Jug's face, the smudge on his chin, and the snowflakes in his hair, Archie thought his friend would look achingly beautiful. Deep set eyes in a pale-as-cream face made more dramatic by his pitch-black curls.

His eyes dropped to Jug's full lips as they parted.

"Arch?" Juggy screwed up his face in pain, trying to focus on Archie with one good eye. "What the..."

"I rolled the car," Archie explained, just watching his friend for a moment. "I'm so sorry, Jug. You hit your head, but I'm going to fix this."

Jughead seemed to be understanding only half of the words. "My head?"

"Yeah, you banged it on the window. Does it hurt much?"

"I can't see out of my eye," he complained, reaching clumsily for his face.

"Here, sit up." Archie helped him upright. "Maybe I can clean off some of the blood."

With an edge of his shirt and water from his canteen, Archie dabbed at Jug's eye, rubbing most of the drying blood from his socket and cheek. For a moment, Archie stared mesmerized at Jughead's mouth.

Jughead noticed.

"Archie," he sighed. There was so much unsaid in that single word. Even concussed, he remembered the one and only time Archie had kissed him.

During a moment of absolute, passionate weakness, Archie had taken Jug by the jacket and planted one on him.

Jughead had been surprised and totally cool about it, but he'd made it clear he wasn't interested in evolving their friendship.

"It's okay, buddy," Archie promised, focusing on cleaning up Jug's face instead of his soft lips. "I'm going to take care of you." He finished scouring his face, exposing several deep scratches and an open wound above his right ear.

“When the storm passes, I should be able to get a signal on my phone.” Without Archie’s hands supporting him, Juggy slumped against Archie’s shoulder. “Worst case,” Archie said, “the girls will send a search party when we don’t show up tomorrow. Maybe sooner.”

Jug’s weight grew heavier.

“Hey, no,” Archie jostled him. “You have to stay awake. If you pass out, you might never wake up.”

“So tired,” Jug slurred. “Can’t see right.” He started to shiver.

“Okay.” Archie forced him up on his own strength. “You sit here, and I’ll start a fire.”

The wood was dry and, with some kindling scraped off the floor, it was a simple matter to start a fire. Then he pulled out every bit of clothing in the pack—a wool sweater and a knitted scarf.

“Hold up, buddy.” Archie sat down beside a groaning Jughead, wrapped the scarf softly around his neck, and then bunched the pack under his head like a pillow. “Rest here, but no sleeping.”

Jughead hugged himself and pulled his knees up a little against the chill, but the fire had caught and as Archie fed it another log, the room warmed several degrees. He double-checked that all doors were shut and windows closed or covered to hold as much heat inside as possible, and then Archie settled beside his best friend.

“Are you seeing better?” Archie asked, slipping an arm under Jug’s shoulders and drawing him in tight to his chest.

“Archie, you know how you always gave me your hand-me-down clothes?” he murmured.

“I was thinking about that too,” Archie admitted. “What about it?”

“...embarrassing.”

“You were embarrassed?” Archie curled one leg over Jug’s, trying to keep him warm with his body heat. “I never knew that. We just knew you needed them. We wanted to help.”

"I don't need your charity," he grumbled even as his right hand crawled across Archie's chest.

"I wish you didn't think of it like that."

"You kissed me," Jug mumbled. "You're always trying to help me."

As his friend's voice trailed off, Archie shook him awake despite the anxiety brewing in his gut. "The kiss?"

Jughead whined a little, but his eyes opened. "I didn't want you kissing me out of some stupid sense of charity."

Wow. That had been an incredibly lucid sentence considering Juggy's head injury.

Archie twisted to see into his face, not yet swelling thanks to the cold weather, but turning red, pink, and purple. "I didn't kiss you because I felt sorry for you." Somehow it was easier to say these things when they were alone and Jughead probably wouldn't remember it anyway. "I kissed you because I'm in love with you." He gave Juggy a friendly squeeze. "Besides, it doesn't matter. Nothing is going to happen between us."

Jughead sighed. "About that..."

Archie frowned down into his best friend's face. "What?"

Jughead closed his eyes and his head rolled against Archie's chest.

"Hey," Archie said, shaking him. "Stay awake. You were saying something?"

"I might've changed my mind," Jughead mumbled, his eyes fluttering tiredly. He parted his lips and fell asleep.

"Hell, no," Archie complained, forcing Jughead up and into a sitting position. "You can't say something like that and then pass out. I need more than that."

Upright, Jughead seemed to wake up a bit. "Archie," he said, still squinting past his injured right eye, "I haven't stopped thinking about you since that kiss."

"Uh." Archie pulled Jug's jacket a little tighter around his shoulders. "Where is this coming from? Why are you saying this now?"

Jughead quirked what may have been a smile. "I don't want to die without telling you I think I'm in love with you, too."

Archie froze, his fingers tight on Juggy's jacket. "What did you just say?"

"I want to kiss you again," he added.

Archie huffed a startled laugh. "Now I know you're concussed."

Juggy leaned in close. "I've been thinking about you and thinking and thinking and..."

"Okay." Archie lost the hope he'd felt. Juggy was out of his mind, hardly making sense. "That's a lot of thinking."

"Kiss me." Jughead made a sloppy attempt at a kiss, but Archie caught him against his chest instead.

"I have a little more dignity than that," Archie said. "Not much, but a little more. If I'm going to kiss you again, I want you to be fully conscious. I'm not into taking advantage of the weak and sick."

"Not," Jug mumbled against him.

"Sure, buddy," Archie chuckled. "Rain check, though."

"Later," Jug agreed. "Tomorrow."

"Yep, tomorrow."

They spent the rest of the night holding each other against the cold, and Archie trying and mostly failing to keep Jughead awake and talking. The first time Archie saw one dash of service on his phone, he texted Betty. Before an hour had passed, the scream of sirens was chasing him up the mountain.

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There was no kiss "tomorrow." Jughead needed serious recuperation. He spent nearly a week in the hospital having his head shaved and stitched together. At one point, they were going to drill a hole through his skull to drain blood, but they didn't need to, in the end.

No one blamed Archie more for what happened to Jughead than Archie did. He'd walked away from the accident with nothing more serious than bruises and scratches. Jughead, on the other hand, hadn't been so lucky. Aside from the

serious concussion he'd suffered, his right eye was so swollen and abused the doctors weren't sure he'd be able to see out of it. His right shoulder was dislocated and he had a hairline fracture in his right hip that was intensely painful. Jughead lay in a daze in a hospital bed looking fragile and pale for days. Though Archie had visited every day to check on him and talk about the subjects Jug was missing at school, there was something rough between them that Archie could feel in the air. He wasn't sure if it was their kiss or their conversation about their kiss, but something had changed between them and Archie didn't like it.

Archie got a text on Friday after school that Jughead was being released. Since his dad and F.P. had already decided quietly that Jughead would be more comfortable recuperating in the Andrews house for at least a few days, Archie rushed home from practice to be there for his dad and his best friend. When he pulled up to his house, F.P.'s truck was parked behind his dad's and the front door was wide open. Archie took the front steps at a run.

"Dad?" he called.

"In here."

The den had been transformed into a sick room complete with tub of first aid supplies and prescription bottles. His dad had put Archie's old twin bed back together and squeezed it in between the TV and the pair of easy chairs. Jughead was already curled on it, his sweat pants and T-shirt too big for him. He wasn't sleeping, but he had an arm over his eyes as if the lights hurt.

"Thanks again," F.P. said, thrusting his grease-stained hand at Fred. "I really appreciate this. I owe you."

"It's not a problem," Dad assured. "Jughead's family."

F.P. continued spouting thank you's as he and Fred ambled out into the foyer. Archie, not wanting to annoy Jughead any further, ducked his head to leave.

"Archie?"

He turned and made eye contact with Jug who had raised up on one elbow. "You need something? You feeling okay?"

Jug quirked a tired smile. "Always the hero."

Archie wasn't sure how to respond. Was Jughead teasing him? "Fine. Whatever." He tried to leave.

"Arch, wait."

Sighing in frustration, Archie turned back a second time. "What?" he said with a definite tone.

Jughead stared, his eyes flickering over Archie's face. "Why is it like this?"

Archie said the first thing that popped into his mind. "You're not going to remember this, but you asked me to kiss you when we were stranded in the cabin. Ever since, things have been weird."

"I remember," Juggy mumbled.

Not sure if he'd heard him correctly, Archie checked over his shoulder to make sure his dad would be busy talking to F.P. on the front stoop for a while and then crept closer to Jug's bed. "What did you say?"

Juggy slumped flat onto his back. "I remember what I said in the cabin."

"You do?" Butterflies fluttered up from his stomach, and he sat uncertainly on the edge of the bed.

"Yeah, and I've been trying to get alone with you ever since," Jughead admitted, "but there's always someone around. My dad. A nurse. Whoever."

Archie's eyebrows popped skyward. "You've been trying to get me alone? That's insane because it felt like you were trying to get rid of me."

"I wasn't." Jughead gave him a look. "I smashed my head against glass and metal. It's possible my signals aren't transmitting correctly."

Archie grinned, but it slipped away when he saw Jug's bruises and scars again. "Why get me alone?" He gingerly touched Jughead's injured eye, not so swollen but sort of greenish and purple, and felt the now familiar kick of guilt.

"God," he ground out, snatching his hand away and fisting it tight. "If only I'd been paying attention. If only I'd swallowed my pride and left when the girls did. If only I'd protected you better."

"Hey." Juggy placed a hand on Archie's fist. "It's not your fault. If anything,

you helped save my life keeping me warm and awake all night. The doctors implied I could have died from a brain hemorrhage.”

Archie stared at Juggy’s hand on his, and he started to shake. He’d been in love with his best friend for so long... He didn’t dare hope his friend had any similar feelings. And yet, Juggy had confessed to thinking about him. Could it be true?

“Why did you say those things in the cabin?” Archie blurted out.

Jughead did not remove his hand, but leaned in. “Because ever since you kissed me, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you. And not friendly thoughts. I mean, I’ve been thinking about your chest. About your mouth. About your hands.” He laughed huskily. “Your hands, for God’s sake. I’m obsessed with your hands, how big they are and rough.” As he spoke, he massaged Archie’s hand. “Yet gentle. The knuckles, the nails. Haven’t you caught me staring?”

“No.” Archie chuckled at the absurdity. “Not at all.”

“I think about you touching me with your big, rough hands,” Juggy said softly. “Can you do that for me?”

Archie’s mouth went dry, and he shifted. “Uh, yeah. Yeah, of course.” He resettled on the edge of Jug’s bed and took a deep breath. He brushed his knuckles softly across Jug’s left cheek. His friend’s eyes fluttered closed, and his lips parted. Archie rubbed back and forth across Jug’s freshly shaven and bristly hair, but his eyes were on Juggy’s mouth. Slowly, he trailed his hand down the side of his face and finally rubbed the pad of his thumb across his friend’s plump lower lip.

Juggy’s eyes popped open and his hand snaked out, grabbed the back of Archie’s neck, and dragged him down to his lips. The kiss was sweet and soft, a tender press. But with Jughead’s scent and skin all around him, Archie was slowly losing control. He tilted his head, and the kiss became more desperate. A nip of teeth, a nudge, and Archie licked inside Jughead’s mouth.

Surprisingly, Jughead didn’t get spooked and pull away. Rather, he raised

both hands and curled them in Archie's shirt, keeping him locked in place. One of his legs bent and the knee rested intimately against Archie's ribs.

This may have been Jughead's first boy kiss. Archie wanted him to enjoy it. God, he wanted him to *love* it

Archie took his responsibility very seriously. He shifted his weight so he could run his right hand over Juggy's scalp and then nudge his thumb along Jug's jaw and under his chin.

Juggy moaned appreciatively, and Archie grew so hard he feared he might come behind his zipper. He'd fantasized about this moment so many times, but never believed it would actually happen. He couldn't believe how lucky he was. Then Juggy slid his bare foot around Archie's thigh and locked it behind his knee, and Archie broke the kiss, panting and completely out of control.

"You okay?" he breathed.

Jughead took his face in both hands and stared at him with fathomless eyes and a kiss-swollen mouth. "Fantastic. You?"

Archie decided to be honest, but he couldn't keep eye contact while he said it. "Uh, I'm hard. I'm afraid I'm going to come on top of you, and I don't want to freak you out."

"Really?" Jug's eyebrows rose and he tried to see between them. Archie lifted his hips to give him a better look. "God," Juggy hissed in appreciation.

Embarrassed suddenly, Archie flushed and rose to put space between them, maybe escape altogether, he wasn't even sure. He just needed room to breathe.

But Jughead grabbed his wrist and yanked him back onto the narrow bed. He didn't say anything, but he shoved Archie down flat and straddled him.

Archie froze, too excited and hopeful to move a single muscle and jinx it.

His gaze on Archie's chest, Juggy slowly slid down his body until he was eye level with Archie's throbbing cock. Jughead popped open the button of his jeans, and Archie hissed in a breath. Inexplicably lucid for a split second, Archie took Jughead's hand and squeezed.

"You don't have to do this. We could just kiss. Or talk. Or I could go...."

Jughead extricated his hand and pulled the zipper of Archie's jeans down, and Archie lost all motivation to stop him. Lost all sense of honor. He stared down the length of his body, not wanting to miss a single second of Jughead between his legs.

Jughead wiggled Archie's jeans down only enough to free his cock, and it bobbed against his belly, wet with precum. Archie fisted both hands, his toes curling.

And Juggy hadn't even touched him yet.

When he finally did, it was with the tip of his tongue, and Archie's hips jerked off the mattress. Chuckling low, Jughead took the crown into his warm, slick mouth and moistened it. Archie cried out quietly, a tiny slip of a whine. Jughead must have taken it as permission to inch-by-inch pull Archie's length deep into his mouth and stroke.

Archie couldn't hold himself back any further. The pressure in his balls was at the point of sweet pain. He jerked Jughead up by the collar and cupped his cock as ribbons of warm, white semen landed on his exposed belly.

Sleepy, spent, and happy, Archie just lay there for a second, breathing heavily, his hand loosely curled around himself. Juggy must have gotten up because he returned with a washcloth and wiped Archie's belly clean. Archie roused himself enough to zip up his jeans, and then he made room on the bed for Juggy to join him as the little spoon.

Jughead slid into bed and settled his bottom in the curve of Archie's body.

"I'm going to show you so many things," Archie whispered into his ear. "So many ways to touch and love and taste. I'm going to take such good care of your body..."

He started to drift off to sleep, but he caught Jughead's reply a moment before he fell asleep.

"Promise?"

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