The Grindylows

by Sleepinghookah

Summary

Lily is dedicated to the pursuit of Truth with a capital T, but in the spring of her 6th year, she's faced with a challenge that will force her to confront the question of whether the end goal ever justifies a lie. Over the course of an adventure to unearth secrets long hidden at Hogwarts school, Lily is brought closer to James Potter and the person she will ultimately become.

And it all starts with an invitation.
In the summer of 1974, Petunia Evans drove her younger sister to her annual checkup.

With Lily away at boarding school for the better part of the year, it was essential that she see the family doctor at least once a summer. As these things always went in the Evans family, Petunia took the time to schedule the appointment, to mark the date on the calendar, and, when the time came, to shepherd Lily into their father’s aging Ford Corsair and drive her the nine minutes – six without red lights along the way – to the pediatrician, empowered by her newly earned license and the 44 hours of unsupervised driving Petunia had achieved since.

The family doctor, a dry-mouthed septuagenarian named Doctor Plower, performed the usual tests. He prodded Lily’s tongue and looked into her eyes and listened to the stethoscope. At the end of the appointment, Dr. Plower recited the same words of wisdom he provided to every young woman of Lily’s age who entered his office: “Make sure you’re eating your vegetables. Remember, gluttony is one of the seven deadly sins, and what they don’t tell you is it can clog your arteries. And, a growing girl needs plenty of sleep.”

It was the last axiom that caught Lily’s interest.

“What exactly would you define as enough sleep?” Lily asked curiously.

When Lily heard Dr. Plower’s response – that an adult required seven to eight hours a night but a girl her age would do better with nine – she’d laughed so hard, she’d nearly fallen off her plastic-lined patient’s bed.

As Lily then informed her alarmed doctor, she hadn’t slept more than six hours a night since she was eleven years old and went off to school. In fact, whenever she managed six hours, she counted herself lucky.

Nothing much had changed since then as Hogwarts celebrated its first day of spring weather in the March of 1976. In fact, if asked, Lily Evans would have only amended her initial statement to declare that she was lucky to manage a full five hours of sleep. There was simply too much to be accomplished for Lily to waste her life away with her eyes shut and mind floating along a stream of pleasant but ultimately meaningless dreams. No one had ever affected change by resting their head on a pillow.

As it was, Lily had managed only four hours the night before, and while it had taken nearly drinking her weight in tea to make it to class, she was holding up admirably. She hadn’t so much as closed her eyes all through her morning classes, and Professor Flitwick had awarded her efforts with a nod of approval. Not that Lily could boast about her accomplishment to her friends. They’d only roll their eyes, unable to comprehend the impossibility of staying awake through class, the privilege of people who regularly surrendered to their biological need for sleep.

One such friend, Will Myers, laid his head wearily upon a desk, letting out a long groan. “Explain to me again why we’re meeting during lunch instead of after class, like a normal club. I like to use this time to, you know, relax?”

“It’s called a lunch meeting,” Dorcas Meadowes responded sternly.
“And because the news doesn’t rest,” Lily added. “It doesn’t recognize things like lunches.”

“Name two things that don’t rest: the news and Lily Evans,” Will muttered, his words not remotely muffled by the arms on which his head was currently buried.

Mei-Lin came to the rescue. “I actually like when we meet over lunch. It helps the day end that much sooner.”

Miserable and entirely out-voted, Will raised his head to glower at his friends. Lily could sympathize; it must have been impossible being friends with such a group of over-achievers.

The Hogwarts Monthly Letter had been Lily and Will’s brainchild in second-year, though they hadn’t succeeded in convincing anyone but their close friends to read it until their fourth, when their social cache at Hogwarts was skyrocketing. It was a monthly newsletter, lovingly written and curated by the group of four, currently meeting in one of the empty Ancient Runes classrooms on the western side of the castle.

First, there was Dorcas Meadowes. Current editor – a position they traded amongst themselves each year after a nearly friendship ruining feud over who would take the top position – and sixth-year Ravenclaw, Dorcas was tasked with calling the meetings and aiming her journalists’ varied attentions and interests in the necessary directions to create an actual, readable paper at the end of each month.

Considering Lily’s hopelessly overbooked schedule, it wasn’t a job anyone would envy, and Dorcas had accepted her turn as editor with extreme hesitation. Seven-months into the job, she had admitted that her fears were mostly baseless. Yes, Will had a tendency to argue against anything that resembled real work, and yes, Mei-Lin hadn’t met a deadline since her date of birth, and yes, Lily couldn’t be contained when she had a new idea, but it was better to lead the pack of maniacs than to be dragged along in the wake of their madness. Under her tenure, the Letter had gained an intellectualism that had been sorely missing from the endless feature pieces that had defined Will’s time as editor the previous year.

Mei-Lin Lai had never cared much for journalism or writing – her imagination was a broad and sweeping thing, powerful enough to stimulate her in the dull hours of the night and never requiring she put pen to page to realize her dizzying daydreams – but where Lily went, she all too often followed. The sixth-year Gryffindor had taken one look around the dormitory with Lily absent and realized that she could either join or be left behind. Ever since, she’d covered sports for the paper. While this mostly consisted of interviewing the house Quidditch team and paraphrasing the news from The Daily Prophet, she’d also tried her hand at introducing muggle athletics to the paper, a decision that often resulted in hilarious errors as Mei-Lin, a pureblood, had never seen so much as a football in person.

The third member of the group was another sixth-year, Will Myers. While Will was loud enough in his frivolity that many wrote him off as containing more air than a bag of crisps, he was by far the best journalist on the team. He was largely motivated by a great-uncle, whose expose on the politicking of goblins had nearly shut down Gringotts in 1878, and a mother who sat as the editor of Witch’s Weekly and was an over-enthusiastic supporter of her son’s budding talents. A Hufflepuff, Will valued people and their contributions to things, resulting in insightful feature pieces that delved into the motivations of his peers and contained angles that could pull at the sympathies of the coldest member of Slytherin House.

Rounding out the four-member team was Lily. There had been a fifth member, once upon a time, a time when all four houses were represented, but in a stunning display of loyalty, Severus had found his membership revoked the very afternoon of the lake incident of fifth year. Things weren’t the same without him, but, as Mei-Lin would argue, their work hadn’t suffered from his absence, and
teamwork was at an all-time high.

Which, considering their tendency toward infighting, would probably fail to impress any outsider looking in on their disorganized gatherings.

“The meeting will be over once you’ve all reassured me that you understand your assignments for next week,” Dorcas consoled Will.

She dangled the hope that lunch might still be waiting for him when the meeting ended, like a fisherman with plastic bait on the end of his lure. And, like the foolish fish, Will was drawn in by the promise, doomed to be unrealized.

Lily, who didn’t doubt they would be there for another half hour at least, took a nibble out of one of the finger sandwiches that Dorcas had generously supplied. Beside her, and in an equal display of disbelief, Mei-Lin took a noisy bite from her apple.

“I’m all clear, Chief,” Will said. “Interview a few shopkeepers down in Hogsmeade. Talk to a few of the students from different years. Nothing much to it.”

“But what’s your angle?” Dorcas pressed

Will drummed his fingers across his desk, like the very question persecuted him. “I won’t know that until I hear their answers, now will I?”

It was an argument the two had fought nearly a hundred times, and Lily could have quoted Dorcas’s responses, no particular talent for Divination required: “But how will you know what questions to ask if you don’t know the story you’re trying to write?”

Lily sat on one of the desks in the room, feet swinging in long arcs and just scraping the floor each time they swung back toward her. Idly, she noticed the mire that was collecting on the soles of her moccasins and brought one of her feet up for further inspection. The sole was worn through, plastic peeling around the edges, and there was a pinprick of a hole that was sure to expand until her beloved shoes better resembled a plastic bag. The question would be whether she wore her trainers for the next four months or abandoned her pride and wrote Petunia for a new pair. Both options horrendous.

Never one to keep her mouth shut, Lily interrupted Dorcas and Will’s bickering to suggest, “Oh! Write about how we should have more Hogsmeade weekends! You can interview the shopkeepers for quotes about how students help drive the local economy, and the students could talk about how Hogsmeade weekends help alleviate some of the pressures of a hectic finals schedule. It’ll be brill!”

“Funny how you’re bursting with ideas for someone else’s story, when I’ve yet to hear a single concept for yours,” Dorcas said.

Lily didn’t shrink, but if there was one circumstance under which she might, it would be when Dorcas cast that painfully flat glare in her direction. Chilly didn’t begin to describe the look in Dorcas’s dark and unyielding eyes. It was true that Lily had yet to stumble across the breath of inspiration that would fill her time for the rest of the year, but these things couldn’t be hurried.

Unlike her friends, Lily fancied herself an investigative journalist. She had neither the interest nor the tolerance necessary for interviews or bland articles on changes to the school curriculum. Her interest in the newspaper was entirely singular: pursuit of the Truth, with a capital ‘T.’

When she’d first entered Hogwarts, it had driven her mad how even simple matters – like what was in the eerie and forbidden forest on the edge of the grounds? Or how exactly had a ghost come to be
haunt the girl’s toilet and why had no one thought to exorcise the wailing nuisance? Or how did the
loo always looked fresh and friendly when none of the girls had ever lifted a finger to clean? – were
shrouded in mystery. Did no one know? Was there a vast conspiracy to keep the student body
ignorant? Worst of all, no one ever appeared to care! Just thinking of people’s complacency was
enough to make her itch.

In her quest for the Truth, Lily was an unstoppable and, oftentimes, destructive force. She would
pick a single topic each term and pursue it with dogged determination. In second-year, she’d exposed
just how the meals were prepared by a labor force of house elves – not much of a secret, she’d
learned later, but for a twelve-year-old, a significant revelation. Third-year had focused on the
spreading practice of using ghosts for labor, eliminating the need to pay the wages of a living,
breathing employee and the subsequent impact on the workforce. Fourth-year, she’d tackled
nepotism on the house Quidditch teams and fifth-year the rates of detentions controlling for blood
status.

Not exactly friend-winning material, but speaking truth to power was rarely met with smiles and
offers to come by for tea.

Unfortunately, she’d yet to land upon a winning story for her sixth-year. The better part of term had
been spent chasing down leads surrounding the DADA professorship and Dumbledore’s unerring
inability to permanently fill the spot. After months of research, however, she’d been forced to, and oh
it pained her to think it, quit. There was just no story to be found, and all she had to show for her
efforts was a notebook of ideas, which, when read in retrospect, made her look like a conspiracy-
obsessed loon.

“Inspiration will come to me,” Lily insisted, swallowing down the note of worry that threatened to
creep through. “It always does.”

Dorcas looked skeptical, and with good reason as Lily had been repeating the same refrain for nearly
two months, but didn’t press. There was never any call to motivate Lily. She was a whirling dervish
of energy when all everyone else wanted was some peace and quiet. She’d sort things eventually.

“And Mei-Lin-” Dorcas began.

“I know. I know. Get started on the Hufflepuff interviews. I’ll have predictions by the end of next
week,” Mei-Lin said.

“I was going to remind you that you’re three weeks overdue on the perils of muggle sky-diving.”

“Oh…that.”

“Yes. That.”

Will snickered.

Not much else was decided upon during their meeting. Like Lily had predicted, they finished with
only three minutes left to the lunch hour, which Will bemoaned loudly as he swanned off to class. It
was back to the humdrum of schoolwork and learning, the very reasons they attended Hogwarts and
an utter waste of brain cells if you asked Lily.

One of the advantages of not eating in the Great Hall was avoiding the body-crushing exodus of
students racing off to class. Hooked arm-in-arm, Lily and Mei-Lin were able to make their leisurely
way to Transfiguration – a joint Gryffindor-Slytherin affair – without knocking into so much as a
single shoulder, two minnows swimming with the current.
“Are you going to have time to meet and work on our DADA essay tonight? If you do, I can help you with the tougher bits,” Mei-Lin offered.

“I don’t know. Maybe.” The way Lily stressed the word and sighed left little doubt that she intended to be far too busy to worry about trivialities like homework.

“Lily, it’s due Wednesday morning. If you don’t make time, you’re going to have to tackle it all yourself,” Mei-Lin warned.

There had been a reason that Lily cast her judgmental, investigative eye toward the DADA professorship. She and Defense had never acclimated to each other. Lily had hoped that in discovering some secret conspiracy about the never-ending revolving door of professors, she would be able to neatly place the blame for her Defense struggles at her professors’ feet. Maybe she would be more accomplished if her education wasn’t interrupted every year by a new professor’s approach to the material. Unfortunately, there was no conspiracy, and all it took to prove the fault rested squarely on her shoulders was a glance at Mei-Lin, who had never failed to scrape an ‘E’ on her DADA assignments.

“I’m going to be busy until late tonight,” Lily said, knowing that Mei-Lin liked to be left alone after nine, drifting away on a sea of dreams that were every bit as real and satisfying whether she was awake or asleep. “But don’t worry. I’ll figure something out.”

“Busy with what?”

Lily didn’t miss the note of suspicion that had crept into Mei-Lin’s voice, and it set her teeth on edge.

“The same thing as always. It’s officially spring, so we’re starting up tennis again. I’m not trying to ditch you or anything,” Lily said.

Years ago, Lily had petitioned the professors for permission to erect a tennis net on the grounds, a request that was met with incredulity. Wizards were absolutely barmy over Quidditch, to the point that all other sport was met with disdain. Lily could still recall her frustration while explaining the principles of the game to a young Sirius Black, the prat meeting each of her answers with an unfavorable Quidditch comparison until she was grinding her teeth in the way her dentist had explicitly warned her against.

The professors had ultimately acquiesced to Lily’s request, though they’d recognized that tennis was never going to capture the imagination of the student body. There was always the real threat that a denied Lily would forge ahead on her own regardless.

She’d purchased the net herself in the winter of her third year, walking out with a trowel, a net three-times her size, and the intention of erecting the thing herself. The ground still hard with the winter cold, she’d spent a good hour banging futilely at the posts before dissolving into a fit of overwhelmed tears. The gamekeeper had come across her then, a massive man named Rubeus Hagrid, and he’d helped her set the net outside his hut, the ground cracking and parting under his meaty fists. On particularly warm days, Hagrid would come out to watch Lily as she played, bringing his boar hound, Fang, who would break from his master and try to weave between their legs as she served.

Of her many activities, Lily was particularly fond of the days when the sun would beat down bright and searing on the back of her neck, and she could escape outside for a few matches. It didn’t bother her that the court was a patch of dirt with no lines to delineate the boundaries. Growing up, she’d almost never had access to a real court, except for those days when her father made the time to drive her down to the sports center two towns over. She’d spent her early years playing tennis in the street,
batting the ball with all her might so it sailed far beyond the traditional boundaries, bouncing it aggressively off car windshields and scraping her knees as she dove to the sidewalk.

“I never said you were avoiding me,” Mei-Lin said sulkily, but Lily was having none of it.

“For the last time, I didn’t ditch you that weekend. I was in the library, just like I said I would be,” Lily snapped.

“Where? Lily, I looked all over the place,” Mei-Lin replied in kind.

Most people would reel back in surprise if they heard Mei-Lin speak in such a harsh tone. It just didn’t fit with the popular perception of Mei-Lin as quiet and unfailingly polite. Lily was her closest friend, however, and given unfettered access to the nastier sides of Mei-Lin’s personality, including her true opinions about the student body. In a word, Mei-Lin thought everybody around her was a wanker. Whether Lily qualified as one of the ranks of ‘everybody’ depended on Mei-Lin’s mood.

“Clearly, you didn’t look closely enough,” Lily said.

The newest source of tension in their friendship was the Saturday before last when Mei-Lin and Lily were supposed to meet in the library to study. While Lily remembered arriving on time and diligently reviewing her notes until well after the half-moon had risen over the castle, Mei-Lin insisted that Lily had been nowhere to be found. Shortly afterward, accusations that she’d been oddly absent for the rest of the weekend followed.

It was, in short, the most ridiculous argument they’d ever had, and that included the time they’d rowed about the true origins of Swiss cheese. Mei-Lin’s bitterness over Lily’s busy schedule was hardly new, a constant buzz of scalding remarks peppered throughout the week as Mei-Lin bemoaned how often she was left to her own devices as Lily flitted around the school. The addition of false accusations on top of Mei-Lin’s typical complaints was almost too much to bear. The accusations may have been false, but Lily’s innocence was impossible to prove as there were no witnesses ready to testify that she had spent her Saturday in the library. They were at an impasse.

“Look, can we just forget about it already? We can study tonight. I’ll make the time,” Lily said as they rounded the corner of the Transfiguration corridor.

“You’re going to need it,” Mei-Lin said, voice a hint kinder. “McGonagall’s probably going to layer on the homework, too.”

“Ugh, do you think?” Lily moaned.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got your back,” Mei-Lin said, squeezing Lily’s arm, a gesture that Lily didn’t hesitate to return.

With only a minute before the start of class, Lily and Mei-Lin entered the doomed class. Lily’s footsteps slowed to a shuffle as she prolonged the minute before class began. The sandwich she’d eaten for lunch felt heavy in her stomach.

Transfiguration didn’t like Lily any more than DADA did. When she was feeling charitable toward herself, she would claim that Transfiguration just hated creative spirits. When she was in a more self-critical mood, she’d admit that it had more to do with the fact that she was an idiot than anything else.

Everyone was already there, the assortment of Slytherins that had claimed the back-left of the room and the entirety of the Gryffindor sixth-year class. All of her dormmates were huddled around a single copy of Witch Weekly, looking sleek and as imposing as a gang of Teddy Girls. In the far back, the boys who had fashioned themselves the Marauders sat, talking animatedly. Today they’d
included their roommates – Duane Hinkley and Khalid Niazi – and the overwhelming maleness of the six boys struck Lily on an almost visceral level.

Looking around the room, Lily recognized how comparatively isolated she was from the rest of her classmates; she was seated in the very first row. For Mei-Lin, it was a dream, a chance to spend an hour with Lily without interference. Lily would have liked to be closer to some of her housemates, like she had been when they were all younger. Certain fit housemates in particular were especially welcome to talk to her. There were, however, benefits to her isolation. Severus was one of the Slytherins in the corner, and the barriers she erected between herself and the rest of the class worked just as efficiently at keeping him out as anyone else.

Lily and Mei-Lin chatted lightly for the few remaining minutes before McGonagall began to lecture, and then it was back to the mechanics of partial Transfigurations. It was exceptionally difficult, as Lily knew from experience, to only partially transfigure an object. By accident? Simplest thing in the world. She’d mastered that as a first-year when all her feathers to teacups would remain soft and speckled as the owl from which they came. Achieving the same thing on purpose, however, was a different matter since stopping the magic at the right point and shaping it to only affect the desired bits was a labor in patience.

Given the difficulty of the subject matter, Lily really ought to have paid attention.

Unfortunately, four hours of sleep wasn’t enough. There was something about McGonagall’s voice, too, so even and strong, like crashing waves. Add in that the topic was boring as a flobberworm, and Lily couldn’t hope to keep her eyes open. Chin propped on her hand, her eyes fluttered shut and that was that. Her heart rate dipped and steadied as she slipped into a doze. Lily didn’t sleep deeply enough to dream, but she still felt a stirring once or twice, like a knock against her side.

Only after she’d opened her eyes once more to find the entire class focused on her did Lily realize that Mei-Lin had been poking her between the ribs. The stares of her classmates were like a dozen mosquito bites to her skin, covering her all over with the sting of their inspection. Lily didn’t much care about the judgmental faces of her peers, but she was absolutely horrified by the look McGongagall was directing at her. It was an expression she’d seen one hundred times before, but it never lost an ounce of its effect.

“Miss Evans, am I hallucinating last month when you reassured me I had caught you sleeping in class for the last time?” McGonagall demanded, voice a whip in Lily’s groggy mind.

“No, Professor,” Lily said, “Only, I wasn’t sleeping just now. I was listening with my eyes closed.”

Snickers rose throughout the class and McGonagall’s’s slit eyes impossibly narrowed. Lily felt guilty for the lie – she was committed to the truth after all – but she couldn’t afford a detention with her packed scheduled and felt it was justified. A victimless crime.

“Well, if you’ve been paying such close attention, perhaps you’d like to show off your partial transfiguration,” McGonagall bluffed.

Lily wanted to laugh, biting her cheek to tamp down the inappropriate urge. If she’d obediently taken notes and internalized McGonagall’s every word, she still wouldn’t be able to pull off a partial, and McGonagall knew it. McGonagall could attempt to humiliate as punishment all she liked, but Lily was virtually immune.

“We only began to cover the topic today, Professor,” Lily said brightly. “No one could successfully complete the spell yet.”
McGonagall raised an eyebrow in victory. “Mr. Potter successfully completed his just a minute ago. Perhaps you missed it while you were ‘listening with your eyes closed.’”

There was full-blown laughter from the class now. Nothing mean-spirited, or at least Lily didn’t think so. Perhaps the Slytherins were having a bit too much fun at her public rebuke, but the scene was too common for Lily to think anything of their mirth. She could be annoying at times, a fact of which she was perfectly aware, but she thought her classmates still liked her well enough.

Lily turned to James Potter at the back of the class. Sure enough, he’d succeeded in partially transfiguring his rat. Where its coarse-haired hind should have grown, there were now a pair of crooked frog legs, slick with a sheen of slime that she didn’t want to contemplate, the residue dripping thick on his desk; it looked like something that could have been cast in stone and set alongside the many grotesqueries that decorated Hogwarts. Seeing her looking, James gave her an arrogant smile and gestured toward his creation. Under normal circumstances, Lily would have liked to stare at that smile – it was one of her favorites, where the corners dipped up enough to showcase the dimple on the left-side of his mouth – but his natural talent for well, everything was likely to score her a detention, so she could only summon up a scowl for him in return.

Turning back to McGonagall, Lily settled for the truth, “Professor, you and I both know I’m rubbish at this, so it’s hardly fair to compare me to your best student. I’ll practice really hard, truly, and next class I’ll show you my partial first thing. How about that?”

Lily could sense the tide turning within the class as people chuckled at her gall. Oftentimes, being unapologetic worked well in her favor. Had she blushed and stammered, the laughter of her classmates would have transformed into jeers, like sharks scenting out chum in the water.

Sighing like Lily was insufferable (as if McGonagall didn’t secretly adore her), McGonagall said, “Let’s aim to listen with our eyes open from now on, Miss Evans. Otherwise, you’ll have the opportunity to show me your partial repeatedly in detention on Friday.”

“Sounds fair,” Lily said, trying not to smile.

Despite her cheeky answers, Lily truly valued her relationship with the Transfiguration professor, so she did her best to remain bright-eyed for the rest of class. It was a struggle, but one she managed to overcome thanks to the helpful pinches Mei-Lin delivered every five minutes from underneath the table. If someone were to look at Lily’s thighs, purpling with bruises, they would conclude she was being abused. Not that the chances of someone seeing her naked thighs were particularly high.

All the same, Lily did enjoy the occasional daydream about just who might discover what she looked like beneath her skirt. She bit her lip to suppress a dreamy smile as her mind wandered. The thoughts that filled her head did wonders for keeping her awake. It didn’t hurt that the main object of her fantasies sat only three rows behind her. There were several boys that Lily fancied in the hazy, undefined way of a girl with no intention of dating – Quincy Terlep, Tristain Codrington, hell, even Sirius Black on occasion – but Potter had a decided lead over the other boys in her year.

The chain of events that transformed James from the bane of her existence to her primary focus every dreary class time was untraceable. Change had snuck up on her as stealthily as the effects of puberty, gradual changes that she took for granted, culminating in one shocking discovery when she was fourteen and could no longer squeeze her torso into the faded, turquoise blouse she’d favored for years. James could still be a berk, to her and others when the inclination struck him, but he also charmed Lily with his devil-may-care attitude and undeniable fitness. Lily didn’t have any particular desire to turn her fantasies about Potter into realities, but she certainly enjoyed the products of her imagination.
Visions of James in mind, Lily survived the rest of class without incident.

Toward the end of class, McGonagall announced, “You’ll all be happy to hear that I won’t be assigning any homework for next class.” She paused to wait out the sighs of relief and exclamations of celebration, much like a comedian riding out the height of the laugh. Lily performed a quick sign of the cross in thanks. “But that is only because you’ll be completing a practical assignment this term. You’ll have the rest of the year to work on it, and you’ll present in place of a final. I’m available for help, but this is a project in which you’ll receive little guidance.”

Lily only half-listened as McGonagall explained how they were to choose one of the principles of magic and create a project surrounding it. There had to be a practical and written element, but McGonagall would leave the majority to their discretion. Basically, it was a pleasant replacement for the final.

Cheerfully, Lily bumped Mei-Lin in the shoulder, a gesture that Mei-Lin returned. They made great partners at project-work. Mei-Lin wasn’t in the running for any awards, but she was a decent student, and better yet, she didn’t mind when Lily became so busy she couldn’t complete her portion of the assignment.

All of Lily’s jubilation fizzled out of her like a balloon with a tear, however, as McGonagall continued, “And for this project, I’ll be assigning partners.”

Beside her, Mei-Lin slumped in defeat. While Lily would have preferred to work with Mei-Lin, she wasn’t too worried about the assignments. McGonagall wasn’t going to condemn her to working with a bigot from Slytherin, too aware of the political climate, and Lily could pull something shabby together if necessary. In contrast, Mei-Lin despised just about everyone outside the staff of the Hogwarts Monthly Letter. Mei-Lin’s marks would turn out fine regardless, but her knuckles were turning white where they gripped the desk, agonizing over fantasies of listening to her classmates jabber on about the pointless for hours on end. Lily pat her arm consolingly.

No amount of comfort could help when McGonagall announced that Mei-Lin would be paired with Marlene McKinnon, one of their dormmates and the one Mei-Lin could stomach the least. When Marlene smiled at them, Mei-Lin’s answering quirk of her lips could only be described as a grimace.

Then, McGonagall said Lily’s assignment, and it was like angels parted the skies to allow a beam of light to flow down and illuminate McGonagall’s kind face. James. Lily would be partnering with James.

There was no fighting off the goofy grin that threatened to consume her face. Not only was she paired with a boy she found endlessly fit, she was paired with the best student in the class! Given her recent behavior, Lily didn’t know why McGonagall had chosen to be so generous towards her, but Lily swore to do something particularly kind in return. She’d work extra hard for the rest of term, just to show McGonagall she was trying.

Once class officially ended, Lily looked over to James. He was already staring at her.

That was the other thing Lily adored about James Potter: he seemed to fancy the hell out of her right back.

“I’m going to talk to my new partner. See about setting up a time to meet and get to work,” Lily told Mei-Lin, not taking her eyes off James for a second.

“I guess I should do the same,” Mei-Lin said morosely.
In that time, James made for the door, so Lily had to hurry after him. She really did want to have a word about the assignment. That and a chance to flirt so blatantly that her father would have a breakdown were he present. To her endless delight, James was waiting for her out in the hall, leaning against the wall of the corridor with his dimple-inducing smirk on display.

“Now then, partner,” she greeted him, and if her voice became embarrassingly low as she addressed him, well, it was no worse than the way his own tone dipped in return.

“Alright? I have to say that was some scene in there. I’m a little disappointed you didn’t see my brilliant transfiguration, what with you listening with your eyes closed. It was pretty impressive,” James said.

“Potter, I’ve seen you dazzle the class with your spellwork for six years straight. I’ve imagined what your partial must have looked like and am suitably impressed.”

“Well aren’t you lucky? Partnered with someone whose spellwork dazzles? Sounds like a guaranteed ‘O.’”

Lily’s brain shorted for a second as she tried to piece together whether James’ words were intended as innuendo. She didn’t think so, but then again it was Potter. Her toes curled a little in her shoes before she remembered to reply.

“You’re definitely the brains of the operation,” Lily conceded.

“Does that make you the eye candy?” James asked. He was grinning, and now Lily was certain he knew exactly what he’d said before and was basking in the way it had ruffled her. It made Lily want to tease him right back.

“No,” she smiled. “I’m afraid that would be you again. Clever and pretty.”

“Then, what does that make you?” he asked.

He took a step forward so that he was no longer leaning against the wall, a crucial step that put him just inside the limits of her personal space. She took the moment to drink in the color of his eyes, usually concealed by distance and his glasses. It was a brown that doubled for amber in some lights, like the briolette pendant that her mum had left for Petunia in her will, rough with varying shades of amber melting into each other and yet beautiful all the same.

Swallowing so that her voice didn’t come out as husky as a serial smoker, Lily answered, “You tell me.”

Instead of giving a real answer, James chucked her under the chin. Lily debated whether it was utterly pathetic to linger over the feeling of his knuckles on her bare skin.

“I can already tell this project is going to be legendary,” James said, the kind of thing he probably told to loads of girls but still managed to imbue with enough charm that Lily felt special at the recognition.

“Do legendary partners get invitations to your birthday party? It’s coming up soon, and I still haven’t heard anything about it,” Lily said.

James had built a reputation from the scope of his birthday parties. There was the great-walk out of fifth year, when he managed to convince all his friends, a.k.a. half the school, to walk out of their Tuesday classes and head down to the Three Broomsticks, a ploy that earned him a month of detentions and the eternal goodwill of the pub’s proprietors. There was the twenty-four-hour birthday
party of third-year – the last time his birthday had fallen on a weekend – where he’d convinced all
the participants to spend an entire day in revelry. Fourth year, he paid the Seranading Ladies to play
his party. Second year, his father invited the national Quidditch team – half of whom showed up in
exchange for free Sleakeazy for life – and first year, he’d convinced Hooch to let him commander
the pitch, putting a fleet of wobbly eleven-year-olds on brooms for an afternoon of flying. James
encapsulated a living legend.

Lily’s first invitation had come in fourth-year. Se’d attended despite her hesitations, all of which
stemmed from the fact that James was an enormous prat. When Severus pressed her on the issue,
she’d been forced to shrug in shame and admit that she really liked the new song by the Seranading
Ladies. Fifth-year, she’d soundly rejected her invitation. Not only was she uninterested in
antagonizing the professors, but she was also thoroughly sick of James’ flirtations by that point.

Since then, James had learned his lessons about propriety and boundaries. Lily thought he may still
fancy her, but he showed it in a more subdued way, which was bearable; preferable. Of course, now
that she’d started to notice the way he filled out his robes, she wouldn’t have minded if he made his
feelings a little clearer. Sometimes he was so subtle that she started to wonder.

“See, you have me in a tough spot,” James said, tapping his chin thoughtfully. “On the one hand,
legendary partners absolutely warrant invitations, but people who blew off last year’s event?
Excluded on principle.”

Lily rolled her eyes. It was so like James to demand that she make amends for something done a year
ago. His memory was sharp as the bristles on his custom-made broomstick. A short list of times
James had remembered something completely obscure and long-forgotten just that year included: the
maiden name of their first-year Defense professor’s wife; the exact order of how Hooch had ranked
the first-year class in terms of flying (all 45 of them); an itemized list of every time Khalid Niazi had
ever stumbled into his person with details on the time and place dating back to second-year; and why
Lily had been late for their Transfiguration final in 1974. James took that formidable memory and he
applied it for evil, namely, holding grudges against anyone who had ever wronged him.

“You’re forgetting that I’m a redhead, and redheads warrant automatic invites,” Lily said.

“You’re confused. I have a strict no ginger policy.”

“Is this a new policy? Because it didn’t exist last year,” Lily said.

“Nope. I just happen to offer exemptions for particularly beautiful witches,” James replied.

Ah, James, and Mei-Lin wondered what Lily found so attractive about him. Not that Lily spent a lot
of time mooning over boys with Mei-Lin. No, she saved that particularly activity for her hours with
Will, who found the topic every bit as stimulating as Lily and was far less likely to throw a book at
her if she started to sigh a bit too fondly as she reminisced about James’ hair.

Lily wandered idly, glancing behind her coquettishly as she did, toward the camber window
overlooking the Quidditch pitch. Tiny blurs whipped around the goal posts, a shock of unexpected
color flying faster than any bird. Joining her, James propped one of his feet up on the stone bench,
the kind designed and installed in old castles for a lady in full skirts busy at her embroidery. The sun
beat down warm, yet not suffocating, and made James’ wide grin that much more brilliant.

“Makes perfect sense that I’m not invited then,” Lily nodded. “Will’s mentioned that I’ve been
looking a bit haggish since Christmas ’hols. I reckon my haggishness is only compounding the
ginger problem.”
Lily then gave her hair an artfully casual flip. She’d teased him, agreed with him, and now played with her hair. All she had to do was find an excuse to pet his arm, and she’d have ticked off every box from Witch Weekly’s guide to flirting with wizards.

The grin that James aimed at her slowly faded with a beleaguered sigh. He began to play with his own hair in a way that had less to do with flirtation and more to do with habit.

“I would absolutely invite you to my party if I could. In fact, you have a standing invitation to every party I throw for the rest of your life,” James said, and Lily smiled as her mind raced with the possibilities of crashing boys-only events, imagined the thrill would be the same as those heady moments when she’d used her father’s razor, something so foreign and inherently male, “but I’m not having a party this year.”

Lily took this news in stride. “Alright, I get it. It’ll be a secret, last-minute event. I’ll be on the lookout this weekend.”

“No, Lily, really. I’m not having a party this year.”

“Whatever you say, James.”

“I’m serious,” James bit out frustrated.

“You are serious,” Lily breathed out, tone disbelieving. “But why?”

“No reason,” James said with a shrug that urged her to drop the subject immediately.

In all her life, Lily had never written a piece on student drama. The ever-changing allegiances and blossoms of love were empty fodder that any hack journalist could uncover. When Lily put her pen to paper, she wanted to expose something meaningful – injustice, discrimination, nepotism and the like. James Potter choosing not to host a birthday party should not have qualified, and yet, every one of Lily’s journalistic instincts screamed in unison. There was a story here. James’ cagy refusals to explain only confirmed it.

“If I’m not pretty enough, you can just tell me, James,” Lily tried.

“Don’t hunt for compliments.”

Lily let the rebuke slide off her as she was hunting, certainly, but not for compliments. No, she wanted to know why he hadn’t stopped fidgeting from foot to foot since they fell upon the topic of his birthday.

“Shite, I need to get to class,” James said, glancing around the corridor and realizing that all their classmates had already sidled away. She had to shade her eyes against the sun to look at him.

“Or you could stay here and tell me more about the party,” Lily suggested.

James chuckled, returning to himself, “Unlike you, some of us care about our marks.”

“Please, you’re clever enough that you could skive off three days out of four and still pass with flying colors.”

James stared at her with an expression that she couldn’t begin to decipher and then, just as inexplicably, said, “I’m never going to get used to that.”

A smile curved his lips, and then he saluted her and walked away, disappearing behind a corner of
bossed stone. Lily stood still, watched him go and tried to process what had to be the most bizarre interaction she’d ever had with the boy.

Get used to what?

Wasting time on deciphering the many moods of James Potter was bound to end in disappointment. As far as Lily could tell, no one had ever succeeded. Lily lost another moment to her thoughts before she remembered with a jolt that she had class starting as well and broke into a sprint to make it to History of Magic.

While Lily had every intention of forgetting all about James’ suspicious behavior, especially as History was one of her favorite classes, she couldn’t stop her mind from drifting throughout the rest of the day. To an unhelpful Dorcas, she speculated as to whether James might plan to quietly celebrate his entry into adulthood with his family. All through dinner, she chanced glances at him from down the rows. After dinner, she’d trekked down to the empty stretch of lawn near the gamekeeper’s hut for tennis and taken a ball straight to the eye as punishment for her distraction.

The shock of pain was a blessing in disguise because, after that, Lily found it comparatively easy to focus on the match at hand, all thoughts of James banished. There weren’t enough members of the Hogwarts Tennis Club for any one participant to be distracted. In fact, there were two: Lily and Evangeline Presley.

“Are you alright, Lily?” Evangeline gasped. Her urgent concern was unfeigned, but there was an element of glee there, too. It wasn’t often that Eva scored a point on Lily. Fourteen and gangly with the onset of puberty, Eva was far from a challenging opponent.

Crouched low, Lily nursed her eye. The sting was persistent, like there was a nettle clamped beneath her eyelid. The left eye remained stubbornly closed, eyelashes sticky against her cheek from the tears that leaked out. All the same, she waved her hand to ward off Evangeline’s attempts to help.

“I’m fine!” Lily called bracingly. “Your serve. Fifteen love.”

Eva raised her racket hesitantly. Paused. “Are you sure? If we wait, maybe Emmeline will come, and I can play her instead. Just until your eye feels better.”

“No,” Lily said and with a burst of determination managed to wrench her eye – red and puffy – open into the barest slit. “Emmeline’s not coming, so let’s play.”

When Eva sent the ball hurtling over the net, Lily tracked it with her right eye. Evangeline liked to send it deep, straight for the baseline. Muscle memory took over, and Lily raced backward, arm already arching for a backhanded groundstroke. The ball connected, impact rattling her arm, and the ball sailed past Eva for an easily won point.

Once upon a time, Lily’s dormmate, Emmeline Vance, played alongside them, giving Lily some active competition. Since the start of the year, however, she’d turned cold on the sport, leaving Lily to Eva.

The lack of challenge didn’t much bother Lily. She just loved the sport. It reminded her of the rare days of family bonding. She and Petunia would break out their tennis whites, kept pristine for just such occasions, even though they knew the terrain around the court was soft dirt and would whip around in the wind, staining their skirts long before the match was finished. They’d play for hours, muscles tightening up in agony from overuse, and take turns imitating each other’s grunts until Lily was rolling on the court with laughter and Petunia was purple in the face with rage.
Lily’s muscles snapped into place, and her mind quieted from the soothing repetition of the volley. She forgot to care about anything. These two-hour sessions were the only time in the week where she truly relaxed.

The sky turned progressively pinker, smears of startling color replacing clear blue as the sun receded behind the castle in the distance. In those minutes, before the sun set entirely, Hogwarts stood at its most magical, a landscape of vivid, ephemeral colors overwhelming the unforgiving gray of stone walls. The sight of it left Lily gaping and breathless no matter how many evenings she spent in quiet study of it. Knowing how much she enjoyed photography, Will had once asked why she never brought her camera to take a shot of the castle blooming with color, and Lily had only shaken her head in mute refusal. She didn’t know how to explain that the transient was never meant to be captured on film; it was meant to be experienced.

After tennis, Lily raced to the Charms corridor for a meeting of the Charms Club, presided over by Professor Flitwick and dedicated to the discussion of Charms theory. It wasn’t the most rewarding activity in the world, but as Charms was the one practical subject of spellwork that didn’t torture Lily on a daily basis, she felt compelled to attend. It was also a club she shared with Dorcas, so the two girls passed notes in the back and traded stories about their days with relish while Flitwick stabbed his wand repeatedly to demonstrate the vehemence of the Austrian Charms style.

Loquacious and energetic about charms, Flitwick often lost track of time, and today’s meeting was no exception. It was nearly ten o’clock by the time Flitwick remembered and sent them off to bed with cheerful calls for them to dream well. Past curfew, Lily had no choice but to return to her house.

The Common Room was abandoned, all the lights extinguished except for the glow of embers from the fireplace. Lily heaved a sigh and dropped her satchel beside one of the armchairs. Mei-Lin would be long asleep, a new resentment against Lily burning in her breast.

By the light of a Lumos, Lily began to tackle the mountains of homework her professors so callously assigned her. It was her least favorite part of the day, when her energy began to wane and there was no promise of pleasures to come with her friends tucked away in bed and the sun set on any opportunities to explore. Yet still, she couldn’t afford to rest. Worst of all, the ever-encroaching guarantee of sleep haunted her. She despised it, the act of lying still in her bed and waiting for her mind to shut down. Sometimes, she wondered whether it was any different than dying, her sense of self so wrapped up in her thoughts that she couldn’t conceive of existing outside of them. Lily knew from experience how short a life could be, and she mourned for the passing of each day, having to say goodbye to herself and her friends on a perpetual loop until one day her mind shut off forever and these miniature deaths yielded to a permanent one.

Around midnight, Lily felt her discipline waning. It was the hour she normally tried to close her books for the night, but her Defense homework was still woefully incomplete, and her Runes translation better befit a third-year. Still, she argued with herself that she could always complete her work the next day. Tuesdays were a blessing as she only had two classes, so she would have rare pockets of spare time to focus on her assignments. Of course, she possessed the self-awareness to recognize that she’d likely make excuses come morning as well, but the lure of relaxation was too strong.

She tossed her unfinished assignments into her satchel and reclined more fully into the sticky leather of the armchair.

If pressed to name her biggest complaint against the Hogwarts lifestyle, it would be the limitations set on how students could spend their free time. Without electricity, there was no telly, no film, no radio. The students were restricted to the grounds, limiting her ability to hike and explore. Excepting
Hogsmeade weekends, there was no shopping or restaurants. She was trapped in a castle with next to nothing to do after the day waned and her friends retreated to their beds.

To fill the hours of darkness, Lily had purchased a boxset of biographies on prominent women of British history. In those pages, Lily found herself time and time again. Those minutes spent reading brought an unsettling clarity, a time where her purpose shone with a brilliant lucidity that the mundanity of the school day usually obscured.

With extreme care, she’d take notes on the women she discovered, detailing their accomplishments and states of mind in a green-leather notebook, brimming with similar notes from years of research. The notebook’s purpose shifted with time as Lily’s focus was ever-changing. The early pages were filled with sloppy attempts at poetry, all rhyming without any attempt at meter; there were her observations from when she’d toyed with botany and notes on the stages of the moon. It was a lovingly maintained collection of a young and vibrant mind.

It had been a birthday gift from her mother – the final gift – and Lily gave it the attention such as a treasure deserved. Every night, she set it carefully inside a hat box from Debenhams, cushioned amongst a bed of pink, papery tissue. The box would then be placed beneath her bed where it was out of danger from misplaced feet or curious eyes. It had not so much as a single dog-ear or ripped page, and, for consistency, she’d written every entry to date in the same black ink. She dreaded the day she’d run out of pages; the current standing was 461 filled out of 500.

Tonight, she was reading the biography of Florence Nightingale. For about three years as a child, Lily had thought Florence Nightingale was a storybook character, what with a name so quintessentially Victorian it sounded like an invention from one of Dickens’ less masterful works. Lily had reflected that her own given name was a step in the right direction, but Evans was horribly pedestrian. Her mother’s maiden name had been Forrester, which at least evoked a sense of a heavy wood to fit with the nature theme, but her mum was long gone and her name along with her, so Lily was stuck with boring, old Evans.

Not that a name was all that important. A mind like Florence Nightingale’s would have thrived even if her name was something dull like Anne Smith. The chapter on Nightingale’s contributions in the Crimean War briefly touched on modern contention as to whether Nightingale’s achievements weren’t exaggerated, to which Lily could only cluck her tongue in disapproval. It was so very like muggle men to call into question a dead woman’s legacy. Fortunately, it was only a brief mention in the fourth chapter. After that, the book settled into a rhythm, highlighting Nightingale’s accomplishments across fields.

It was the scope of what Nightingale had achieved that left Lily breathless. Here was a woman who had not limited herself to one field of proficiency. Mastery of one area of study was admirable of course, but Lily fancied herself a renaissance woman at heart, and Florence Nightingale encapsulated what she wanted to achieve. The icon had revolutionized the role of nursing, helped make strides for social reforms, contributed to the field of graphical representations, improved sanitation standards, and written on a broad variety of topics. Over the course of a long but unhealthy life, Florence Nightingale had never wavered, had never succumbed to the limitations other tried to place on her gender.

The next day, when Lily’s eyes fluttered shut in class and weariness settled into her bones, she would remember Florence Nightingale. Dedication, discipline, and effort were the three keys to success, and Lily thought that if she could only achieve a third of what Florence Nightingale had, she could die a happy woman. The scent of the room sweetened and grew heady as Lily lost herself to indulgent imaginings of a world in which she had left a definitive mark. She would not care if one hundred years later people had forgotten her name and her personality, so long as something she’d
contributed to the world – a new spell, a discovery in the field of biology, an award-winning exposé, a political career (the possibilities were truly endless) – was remembered and felt for centuries to come.

The stirring motivation of Nightingale sat heavy with Lily as she went about her nighttime routine, removing her makeup and preparing for bed. So many hours wasted each day on frivolities, on sleep. The very fact that she had makeup to remove was a testament to her vanity. No one would remember her for being pretty in a century, or even thirty years, when her beauty would be long past its expiration date. Despite all the work she put into focusing on what truly mattered, she was still a slave to the expectations of her age.

All four of her roommates were fast asleep when she crept into her dormitory. She had the room’s contours perfectly memorized from many such late-night entrances and didn’t require the guide of candlelight to find her way to bed. She took four steps forward, a half step to the left to glide around the trunk at the foot of Mary’s mattress, ducked beneath the fairy-lights Marlene had strung between the bannisters of hers and Emmeline’s beds, and then she parted the gauzy folds of her own coverings and collapsed into her old adversary.

Tonight, something was different. Rather than the soft rustle of sheets, Lily heard the unmistakable crinkle of paper as she settled beneath the bed sheets.

The mystery paper was a note, or rather, an invitation. The message was inscribed in impersonal, newspaper print on standard parchment:

Date: Saturday, March 27, 1976
Where: The Southside of the Forbidden Forest
Attire: Formal
Guests: Not permitted sans their own invitation
See you soon...
G

The signature would several times, disappearing beneath an illustration of seaweed. While the note offered no more information, Lily knew exactly what much sought-after treasure she held in her hands. Before her eyes, the invitation began to disintegrate, so she hastily scanned the contents, memorizing the time and location of the party. When the note had dissolved entirely, she was left with a starfish in her hands, bleached orange-pink from the sun. She studied the souvenir for a long time, the only evidence of what had just occurred.

The Grindylows. She’d been invited to a Grindylows party.

Chapter End Notes

There aren’t really words for how excited (read: nervous) I am to be starting up another story. I’ve been working on this for nearly 10 months and have been eager to share it with the world. I’ve been hesitant to post because I keep editing and moving the pieces around to make it more tightly plotted, but I think it’s time to release it like a baby bird.

A few warnings: I chose mature for the story because of later events, but it’ll read as teen for the overwhelming majority of the story unless I’m feeling smutty in later chapters (and who knows really?).
The greatest warning, though, is that these are complicated, messy characters, and you're going to want to strangle pretty much all of them at one point or another (hopefully, you'll love them the rest of the time.) Crit is more than welcome, and I have no problem with reviews where you say you're frustrated with a character BUT please, please, please double-check when you do if your review comes off like you're trying to inform me that "X" action is immoral. When my characters do something wrong, I'm well aware of it, and reviews that try to inform me of it, make me bonkers. It's just a personal preference, please & thank you.

That said, I live for reviews, and I'm going to be super greedy because I've been sitting on this chapter since March, just waiting to see what everyone thinks, so I look forward to hearing from you!! Hope everyone enjoys!
The Dawning

Chapter Notes

So in my eagerness to get the first chapter posted, I think I forgot to make 2 important points of order. 1) An enormous thank you to cjheyhey, who has been reading this story for the past year, keeping my worst impulses in check and providing brilliant feedback; 2) I’ve finished 10 chapters in the past year. I’ll be posting one chapter per month so that I can keep a steady update schedule.

And again, highly excited about this story. It’s a more complicated & layered undertaking than I’ve seriously attempted before, so I hope that it confounds and surprises you as it has me. But more than anything, I hope it just makes you really love Lily Evans.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Grindylows: legend, institution, scourge. Opinions differed on the elusive society, but on one count all parties could reach consensus. Everyone had an opinion.

Muggleborns were first introduced to the Grindylows on the train, or in the carriages, or the Great Hall on that long-sought September 1st, where they met magic for the first time. The initial view of Hogwarts, looming up out of the mist, like it floated on a gentle puff of wind, not firm foundations, was the first spell Lily Evans witnessed on her September 1st. She’d been bright-eyed and overwhelmed all through the welcome feast, in no position to notice when packages, all decorated with that notorious, winding ‘G’, materialized before the prefects.

More than five years later, Lily was no longer oblivious.

Ancient Runes was going through a period of unpopularity with fewer students opting for the elective class each year. Sometimes it happened that way. When Lily was a second-year, it had been Arithmancy that was out of fashion. Low enrollment had left many of the Runes classrooms unoccupied, or rather, newly occupied. As of that morning, Dorcas had secured the classroom at the furthest end of the Runes corridor as the permanent headquarters of The Hogwarts Monthly Letter.

The desks had been extirpated to the periphery of the room, settled like a silent audience. A mahogany trunk – the kind with rows of complicated buckles, like a magician might use – had been set up in the center of the room. It was a gift from Will’s stepfather and would act as a meeting table. Sat inconveniently low to the ground, the members of the newspaper loomed over it, their chairs designed for desks with proper heights. On the chalkboard, Lily had stuck the shell, the only evidence her invitation ever existed. In white, Lily had drawn an arrow, pointed to the shell and labeled ‘A.’

The shell was exhibit ‘A,’ but Lily had organized and reorganized everything she knew about the Grindylows a dozen times over that day. Here’s what she knew: The Grindylows were a secret society that had operated at Hogwarts as long as anyone remembered. The earliest official reference to the society, according to Hogwarts: A History, was 1750, but word-of-mouth placed its inception earlier. Their name was a reference to the secrecy with which they conducted themselves. Grindylows lurked in the deep recesses of sitting water, submerged and hidden by a wealth of
seaweed. No one ever anticipated a Grindylow until they were already in its clutches, dragged to a waiting, watery grave.

All of which made the Grindylows sound far too sinister, though their motives were unclear. They seemed to reinvent themselves every year or two. During Lily’s first year, the group had appeared obsessed with power, courting the most successful students. Hence, the welcome gifts for prefects. A year later, the group’s motives had transformed, and they became the hosts of wild parties that kept everyone talking for months. Third-year – Lily’s favorite – the Grindylows caught the spirit of altruism, decorating the castle for holidays and arranging for free butterbeer on Hogsmeade weekends. Then, another year of partying, followed by a suspiciously quiet fifth-year, all culminating in the current school year, where the parties were plentiful: intricate inventions, lush settings, and, according to those who’d scored an invite, Honeydukes baskets for party favors.

Academic studies existed in the muggle world, too. Petunia’s secondary boyfriend, pimply-faced Derek with his strange fixation on professional bobsledding, had joined a dining club at uni, a decision Petunia largely blamed for his unceremoniously chucking her on Boxing Day.

Unlike Derek’s dining club, no one had ever confirmed their membership to the Grindylows. No one denied its existence, but official record set it as a society of no one. There were rumors, of course. Rumor had everyone from Hesper Starkey – the famous potioneer – to Lord Voldemort himself as society alumni. But, in the end, it was simply rumor. Through loyalty or coercion, the members remained mum long after leaving Hogwarts behind.

“This is the article, gents!” Lily announced. “Think about it! They’re a complete mystery. They could be the sinister underbelly of the death eaters for all we know, and they operate among us! You can’t ask for a more compelling title than ‘Grindylows Exposed.’”

Dorcas’s smooth, brown brow creased, concerned. “It’d be a spectacular coup, but they’ve kept secret for centuries. Do you really think you can split this thing wide in a couple months?”

“But you see, they’re just students! It doesn’t matter how brilliant the founders were or anything like that. All I need to do is outwit and unveil a few of our classmates!” She could manage that while sleeping. “I’m so confident, in fact, that if I don’t have a story by May, I’ll write whatever puff pieces you like. No complaints.”

Dorcas liked the stakes, but she still turned to Will for a second opinion. “What do you think?”

“I think she’s barreling in with no plan. No research. Just a hunch,” Will said, “And I love it.”

God bless Will and his willfully wicked ways.

He was chomping on a stick of Drooble’s Best Blowing Gum, almost like it was chewing tobacco, gum wedged off to the side between his cheek and back-teeth. Keeping it in place, Will smiled widely, conspiratorially, at Lily.

“I just need to find a starting point, and from there…” Lily said.

“Your starting point’s obvious,” Will said, gesturing to ‘Exhibit A’ on the board. “Go to the party and sniff out the members.”

“Assuming they go to their own parties. We know practically nothing about them,” Dorcas pointed out.

“That’s not true. Mei-Lin, tell them what you heard,” Will ordered.
All eyes turned to Mei-Lin, recalcitrant and shrunk low in her chair. She’d always had a penchant for baggy clothes: trousers that trailed the floor and hand-me-down t-shirts. Today, she donned robes a size too large, and the combined effect of her robes and posture gave the impression that she wanted to burrow straight through the floor.

“You know something about the Grindylows?” Lily asked, blind to Mei-Lins’ unwelcoming posture.

Unwillingly, Mei-Lin muttered, “Well, there are rumors. My parents told me some things before I started here. Probably hoped I’d be picked. It could just be a load of rubbish, though. Twaddle so purebloods feel better about being snubbed for membership.”

“Oh, calling them rumors is how pureblood parents get around confidentiality and tell their kids about the super cool society they were in,” Lily said, insightfully.

Lily had never met Mei-Lin to study the night before as promised, and Mei-Lin’s resultant bad humor had sat like a parrot on her shoulder all morning, squawking in her ear about betrayal and respect. Only Lily was too oblivious to notice. So it was that Mei-Lin answered Lily’s questions, all without ever looking up from the thread fraying on her sleeves.

“Fine. From what I’ve heard, the Grindylows are old, like, really old. Like, sixteenth century old. Back then, the only school clubs were Quidditch and gobstones, so a bunch of boys created a club to sit around and take the piss all day. They wanted it to be exclusive though, and refused a student membership for some ridiculous reason. Think Potter and his mates keeping Sev out of a club for the grease in his hair. Something like that. So, faculty disbanded the club.”

“Wait, the club’s explicitly forbidden?” Lily asked.

“Maybe. They may’ve overturned the ban at some point, but I don’t know for sure.”

Fishing in the pocket of her robes, Lily unearthed a pen and the miniature notebook she always kept on-hand, a fity-sheet notebook with a cartoon, pink-maned horse on the cover. She’d salvaged it from the bottom of a bargain bin over Christmas ‘hols, juvenile but effective. In crude short-hand, she recorded Mei-Lin’s intel and the note: Query McG on sch. rules re: sect societies.

“That’s great, Mei-Lin,” Lily complimented warmly. “Anything else?”

Growing less moody with the praise, Mei-Lin admitted she knew little else. Her parents remembered the Grindylows as much the same, all about parties and a good time.

“So much for the death eater theory. They’re just privileged kids getting off on their own superiority, like every other exclusive society in history. Great if you’re running a gossip column, but not too impressive,” Will said.

While Lily agreed with Will’s assessment, she still felt it was a story worth telling. Unwittingly or by design, the Grindylows had created a new tier of wizard in Britain, one in which you were either a Grindylow – current or former – or were decidedly left out. The repercussions of this schism could range from anything to a sense of self-consciousness among non-members to a full-blown network of insiders. Whenever two wizards entered a room, did they assess one another for some sign of former membership, recognizing their fellow alumni and granting favors accordingly? A hundred doors already slammed on Lily because of her parentage, and she didn’t think she was drawing an extreme parallel. The false sense of superiority that the society granted was surely a breeding ground for prejudice, sure as summering in Antarctica guaranteed a cold.

“Did your parents give you any tips on how to get recruited?” Will asked.

“Girls, I would not hesitate for a second if I was offered a spot. Are you kidding me? Secrets and glamor? I was born for the posh life,” Will replied without a hint of insincerity.

“But really. They just said I should work to stand out,” Mei-Lin said. Then, after a pause, “And that I shouldn’t feel too awful if summer comes around, and I haven’t been recruited because they’ll love me regardless.”

Skipping over Mei-Lin’s sentimental admission – one that would have made Lily burn with jealousy had she dwelled on it – Lily said, “Summer of this year? Beginning or end?”

“What does it matter?” Mei-Lin asked.

Quick on the uptake, Dorcas answered, “It would mean that sixth-year is the last chance to be recruited. And, if it’s start of summer, they probably start their recruiting beforehand. Soon.”

“But they’ve already started,” Will concluded.

“They didn’t say exactly, but I think they meant the start because they were acting like I was going to come back from term heartbroken, which is shite, you know? Like, why would I want to be part of some uppity society, filled with people I probably despise? No, thank you,” Mei-Lin said, crossing her arms with an air of self-satisfaction.

Lily was thrilled. The way she figured it, the Grindylows would never be more exposed than during their recruitment period. She theorized they drew from the sixth-years only; it would explain why the society dramatically changed every year, member turnover. Luckily, the sixth-years were bumbling fools. Tongues would be loose, spirits high, and the need to boast about their achievements an itch to be scratched.

“So, do I have your permission to pursue this?” Lily asked Dorcas. Technically, they required her approval on all articles.

“But not like I could stop you,” Dorcas said drolly. “But I wouldn’t, even if I could. It’s a brilliant idea.”

Lily was excited. More than excited, she was buoyed along by the promise of purpose. And yet, there was no swelling awareness, no sense of triumph or change in the air to signal the true scope of what was about to begin. Lily’s every investigation had consumed her, but the significance of this one, the way the article would test her, alter her irreparably, was obscured by the mundanity of just another Tuesday at Hogwarts. The four reporters shared the same lack of foresight, unaware they had just begun a journey that would test and break friendships, create new ones, and see the introduction of several new relationships, one which would go on to rock wizarding Britain. To save the world.

The rest of the day slid away, even as Lily clutched desperately at the seconds zooming by. She wanted to tackle her new pursuit with gusto, but her commitments, namely, tutoring Quincy Terlep, prevented her.

Nearly any other boy would have met with a distracted Lily that day. Classes were officially over, and the chance to start her research loomed in the foreground. Quincy Terlep, however, was fit with a capital ‘F.’ There was something smoky about him – the crackle of his voice, the ochre undertones of his arms, the long lashes that framed his eyes with kohl. Exceptions were always made for Quincy Terlep, and Lily was no different.
Like always, Quincy strolled into the library fifteen minutes late and disarmed Lily’s complaints with a smile.

“Beautiful day, yeah?” Quincy said by way of greeting, and Lily melted.

Ah, Quincy Terlep.

Twenty minutes into tutoring was always enough to dispel any notions of romance from Lily’s head because, alas, poor Quincy was as beautiful as he was dense. He struggled ignobly to decipher a rune that they’d covered half a dozen times that day and a hundred times that month. Lily still appreciated their tutoring sessions in much the same way she appreciated a well-preserved painting, the immediate sensation of breathless wonder to be forgotten entirely as soon as she left the museum.

Quincy always crouched low, back bent in an inverted comma over his materials, so that his nose scraped along the parchment and Lily questioned whether Quincy may have poor eyesight to rival James.

She’d watch his work with a lazy eye, making a correction whenever he veered wildly off course but otherwise advising him to consult the textbook. Normally, she’d capitalize on the moment to finish some of her homework, but she’d done the responsible thing and caught up that afternoon. Free from her responsibilities, Lily leaned back in her chair and resumed her thoughts on the Grindylows, organizing a mental catalogue of questions and angles through which she might pursue her investigation.

Interviewing the professors might reveal a few insights, but they were hardly her silver bullet. No, nothing would compare to a conversation with an actual member. No, unmasking a member! The morning’s discussion had cemented an impression of the sordid in Lily’s mind, and she was already framing her piece as a serious exposé rather than a fluffy exploration of school societies. Lily wondered whether anyone had ever tried (and failed) to expose the Grindylows and felt an embarrassing rush of liquid heat slide through her at the possibility of achieving something that had eluded others for hundreds of years.

A gentle laugh caught her attention, and she realized Quincy was watching her.

“What?” she asked, stupidly.

“Nothing. Just, you look like such a bloke sitting like that,” Quincy said.

Lily followed his eyes to her posture. She’d stretched out with her feet propped on the seat beside her, and there was something commanding, even arrogant about her repose. Breaking the norms of her gender, she took up space. Lily didn’t recognize the suggestion of her position, thinking instead of the way her robes didn’t flatter her figure, how her hair pulled back in a ponytail could make her face look angular and boyish. In the same circumstances, Mary MacDonald might have shot back with something self-assured, flirtatious even.

But Lily was no Mary MacDonald, so she simply shrugged and admitted, “I am what I am.”

Quincy laughed like she was uproariously funny, The sound ping-ponged through the stacks and risked bringing the wrath of Madame Pince upon them both.

Lily was reminded of why she hated the library. It was a stifling room. There was a community library in Cokeworth that Lily occasionally visited, which she preferred. The Cokeworth library was in a post-war, one-story building caddy-corner to the firehouse, and by all measures an unimpressive structure. Still, it was built to encourage collaboration: low shelves that didn’t prevent
communication, open centers where two book lovers could stand and talk, gray chairs by the circulation desk that invited you to settle in for an afternoon of study. Sometimes, she’d open a random book to find a bookmark still pressed into its pages, bubble letters announcing the library’s newest reading challenge or reminding the reader to thank their local librarian. The Hogwarts library, in comparison, was stony and academic, fostering no creativity or conversation. The bookshelves lined the cavernous room from front to back, cramped together so that students could only walk single-file down the many rows. Their current seats were beside the Runes and ancient languages section, and whenever a student passed by to enter the stacks, their bag would brush up against Lily’s hair and send her ponytail swinging.

Hoping it might lessen the sense of suffocation, Lily stripped off her outer robes.

“Any chance I’ll see you at tomorrow’s Potions meeting?” Lily asked, pleasantly.

It was a game to them. Quincy may have been a member of the Potions Society, but he never attended their meetings, a participant on paper only. Every week, Lily would ask, knowing Quincy would cheerfully agree to show up to the next meeting only to break his word come Wednesday. It was a joke that had transcended to ritual, so when Quincy broke from the script, Lily was startled.

“Actually, I can’t. I have big plans tomorrow,” Quincy said.

“Big plans? Unlike those other days you had to skip last minute because you had big plans? Got a date?”

“Not a date. Something even better,” Quincy said.

“Alright, then. Out with it,” Lily pried.

“Yeah, Terlep. Out with it.” James emerged from one of the stacks. In the half light of dusk, he cast a long shadow, and Peter hunched within it, looking warmed as always to be permitted into James’ presence. “If you’ve got something good, I want in.”

“Like you want to come?” Quincy asked, scratching his head.

“Sure. Tell me all about it,” James said, spinning an empty chair about, so that he could sit on it backwards, long legs splayed out from either side.

There was a crunch and smack as James brought an apple to his mouth and took a bite. The sound was like a challenge in the silence. It brought Lily back to her schoolgirl years, questioning her mother as to why it was a sin for Adam and Eve to take a bite from the apple; after all, her mum packed one in her lunch bag every day. Now, watching as James chewed to the side with lips wet from the luscious juices, Lily didn’t wonder how an apple could be sinful. Somehow, the casual way he bit into it quadrupled the arrogance that always emanated from him in waves.

“Well, it’s not going to be – that is – of course, you can come...but um, it’s just hanging out with my mates. Playing some Quidditch,” Quincy stammered.

“What position?” James shot back immediately.

“Um, chaser.”

“Who’s playing keeper?”

“Wolf.”
It was like witnessing an interrogation. James glanced back to smirk at Peter. Shrugged.

“Never mind,” James said. “Sounds like it’s going to be a bollocks match. Neither of you can play for shit.”

The entire interaction left Lily perplexed, wondering what Quincy had done to inspire such rudeness from James. Then again, it wasn’t entirely outside the norm for James to take a jab at someone just because he could. She’d been on the other end of his insensitivity many times. In fact...

“So what’s up with this study session? I didn’t realize you two were friendly,” James said.

Quincy didn’t jump to answer, likely embarrassed to need assistance in the first place, so Lily said, “Tutoring! Everyone can use a little help sometimes.”

“Oh! Are you looking to tutor anyone else? Because I could really use some help in DADA,” Peter said, emerging from behind James.

Before Lily could explain why that wouldn’t be a good idea, James stepped in for her, laughing, “If your goal is to pass, Pete, then I would pick a different tutor. Anyone but Evans here, honestly.”

It was news to Quincy that Lily was a complete failure in many of her classes, and his surprise was almost comical. Heat crept up the back of Lily’s neck. She wanted to ask James why he’d announced her weakness like that, why he’d taken so much pleasure in calling attention to what was undoubtedly a sore spot for her, as it would be for any witch.

With time, Lily had come to terms with the fact that complicated spellwork would always be incomprehensible to her, that her strengths laid elsewhere in the realm of facts and figures, the areas of study that could be explained within her textbooks. Still, there was this choking misery that lingered from every time her marks would be mailed home and Petunia would see. Not only was Lily wasting her time at a school that would offer her no steady, respectable career, no options, she wasn’t even thriving there. She could just picture the way Petunia always held the letter, her long, thin fingers gripping it distastefully at a distance, as if she was worried she might become infected by magic.

“You’re not an ace at Defense?” Quincy asked.

Like she did every time she entered a DADA classroom, Lily choked down her shame, accepted her reality, and vowed to wear it with pride. She smiled at Quincy. “James is right. I’d probably make Peter worse if I tried to help him. Defense doesn’t make half as much sense as Runes.”

“No way! Hey, if you ever want a tutor, I’d be happy to help,” Quincy said.

Gently, Lily rejected the offer. She was happy relying on Mei-Lin and scraping by. She’d labored to accept her lot as a failing Defense student and didn’t see the need to reintroduce hope into the equation.

Then, Quincy continued, “And don’t feel bad about it. Swotty girls aren’t hot.”

Lily didn’t know where to begin processing that piece of news. Should she be offended? Flattered? Quincy clearly thought the latter as he was grinning at her, arm wrapped around the back of her chair, not quite touching her but well within the bubble of her space, closer than she liked people to sit without permission.

“Is that why you’re so popular with girls, Terlep? Because of all those failing marks?” James asked, and this time it was obvious he was aiming to hurt, the words a growl.
Quincy took it in stride. “Exactly, and why you can’t get some girls to look twice at you.”

Again, Lily was left confused. Last she checked, James had never struggled to find a date, a girlfriend, and admirer, anything. And Lily had certainly looked twice.

“Are you allowed to have that in here?” Lily asked, nodding towards James’ apple to diffuse the tension.

The atmosphere of their secluded corner transformed immediately, like all their blustering had just been play-acting. Rather than glaring at Quincy, James now turned to her, and he was no longer derisive or on-guard; he was playful and smiling fully.

“You mean this one?” James said.

He dropped his apple core to the floor. He gave the apple, moist brown with oxidization a kick so that it rolled from beneath the table, past Quincy’s sulking form, and down an empty aisle of Latin translations. Lily watched its progress with a gaping mouth.

“You can’t just...you can’t just leave it there!” Lily cried.

“Watch me,” James said, delighted. “See you in class tomorrow, Lily. Try not to fall off your broom and die, Terlep.”

“You wish,” Quincy muttered.

His words barely reached James, who’d already turned to leave, Peter stumbling in his wake. Addled, Lily tried her best to return some focus to their tutoring session, but Quincy was a lost cause. Despite his rejoinder to James, he was clearly irritated at having been called a flailing idiot. People didn’t frequently target Quincy like that, and he didn’t have the coping skills to let the slight roll of him like Lily did. There would be no more tutoring tonight.

When Quincy finally sauntered off, Lily lingered only long enough to crack her back – hands clasped tight behind her and back arched until she heard the satisfying click of vertebrae – before she hurried off to a meeting of the Dueling Club.

It was the most popular club that Lily attended and one of the only activities where she didn’t boast a leadership role, which was both relief and thorn in her side. At the beginning of every year, the club was flooded with eager young faces, charged by fantasies of high-powered battles that would earn them glory and admiration. Meeting new people was pleasant, but there was something irritating about those delusional early days when the moderators ran themselves ragged to stop jumped up third-years from decapitating their friends. When, as the days wore on, the herd began to thin. Lily breathed a sigh of relief.

Today, there were only seven students in the spacious dungeon, fewer than ever. Lily drifted naturally to Will and Mei-Lin, who were already there and bickering fiercely about how they should split the partners for the day. Neither of her friends had noble reasons for attending these meetings. Mei-Lin began to tag along in order to spend more time with her friends and openly insisted that dueling held little appeal, whereas Will was drawn by the exciting prospect of seeing Remus Lupin, the President of the club, sweat. With Remus and the Marauders missing for the day, Will was eager to partner with a familiar face.

Ultimately, Lily agreed to partner with Will because he had a better knack for offensive spells, and Lily required all the practice she could get. Mei-Lin settled on the flagstones beside them and chimed in helpfully throughout their lopsided duel. The best Lily could do was try to escape the battle
without getting her hair singed off, flinging herself bodily to the side to dodge curses and shaking as her weak shields were battered.

With little better to do, Mei-Lin took to teasing her busier mates. “Will, truly sorry lover boy wasn’t here today. You dragged your sorry arse all the way down here for nothing.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Will said. “Lily’s doing a marvelous impression of a startled horse, and that’s an image galleons can’t buy.”

“Also, it’s so relaxing to not have…you know who here today,” Lily said.

No, she wasn’t referring to Lord Voldemort. Quan Ngo was a perfectly lovely bloke, a seventh-year Gryffindor and excellent gobstone player. He was also the bane of every meeting of the Dueling Society. Late last year, he’d snapped his wand in half in a freak accident, and he and his new wand simply hadn’t come to terms yet. Every meeting was witness to at least one incident where a spell went awry and hit an innocent bystander or where a simple stinging hex transformed into a slicing spell that could take your arms clean off. It had become common practice to wait in bated silence every time Quan cast, prepared to drop to the floor on a breath’s notice if his wand rioted against him.

Lily had become well-acquainted with the floor of the dungeons, but even in Quan’s absence, she wasn’t spared. Despite her best efforts, Lily failed to block a Reducto sent her way by Will and found herself on her back once again. She groaned. The floor of the dungeon was bitterly cold against her neck. From her sprawled position, she gazed pitifully up at Will and entertained the brief thought that Filch was not satisfactorily cleaning the ceilings because the rafters above here were painted with the gauze of a thousand spider webs. Will and Mei-Lin each gripped her by a hand and hauled her back to her feet. For one moment, she defied gravity and hovered in the air, before she landed, steady, on her feet.

“Dear, even by your standards, you’re off today,” Will said.

“I guess I’m still in another world with that story about the…you know…hot cross buns,” Lily said.

“Of course, you are,” Mei-Lin said fondly. She pet absently at Lily’s messy hair, returning the wayward strands to their assigned places.

From across the room, Constance Arnolds asked if Lily needed an escort to the Hospital Wing. Constance was the Vice President of the club, a seventh-year with a head of frizz and teeth so peculiarly small that it was often the first thing someone noticed about her, the effect only heightened by her near ever-present smile. She never let her disconcerting teeth hold her back as she powered through a room, talking to everyone who so much as glanced in her direction. Constance’s voice carried through the dungeon, enhanced by the surety of a person who had never discovered a reason to distrust her fellow man. Lily wasn’t inclined to idolize the people she knew, preferring to name the women who had made a true difference in the world as her role models, but, if pressed, Lily would have chosen Constance for her unwavering confidence.

In a whisper, Lily asked her friends, “Do you think Constance could be a Grindylow?”

“Absolutely not,” Will said, definitively.

Lily frowned. To her mind, Constance was the very definition of Grindylow material. Well-known throughout the school, with a couple dozen people who eagerly called themselves her friend, she was also involved and successful at classwork. Constance had a bright future outside Hogwarts and a
successful career within. The perfect prospect.

Will explained his reasoning, short and bitter, “Too ugly.”

“What?” Lily gasped. “What does that have to do with anything.”

“Grindylows are supposed to be popular.”

“And Constance is popular,” Lily retorted. There was never an empty seat beside Constance at the Hufflepuff table during dinner. A never-ending rotation of students filled the coveted spot.

“Constance isn’t popular. Constance is well-liked,” Will corrected her with a raised finger. “School politics, ladies. If you’re not pretty, you’re doomed to be the sidekick. Now, Ashley Michaels –” Will named one of Constance’s closest friends, delicate and sweet if less likely to inspire true admiration “– she’s popular. Has fewer friends, but popular.”

Lily and Mei-Lin shared a disgruntled look. They wanted to feel outraged, but the best they could summon up was muted disappointment. With his ability to cut to the heart of their peers’ motives, they knew Will would have the right view of it. And Ashley Michaels was a fine girl, no Constance Arnolds, but not a waste of Hogwarts’ precious resources either. Lily wished it was more of a comfort.

Lily’s conception of popularity was skewed, so she’d need to rely on Will to help her identify the members. She didn’t Will’s help, however, in identifying the prettiest girl at Hogwarts. The image of Mary MacDonald rose to her mind’s eye. If there was one definition of popular all three of them could agree upon, it would be personified by Lily’s other roommates.

Said roommates could all be found in the girls’ dormitory after the Dueling Society meeting had come to a close. Before entering their shared room, Mei-Lin drew in a deep breath, like she was summoning her courage for battle.

No grisly war scenes awaited them. Only their three roommates, laid out amidst the girlish decadence of the room. Perpetually messy, their dormitory looked like ten girls had spilled the contents of their handbags into a two-by-two container but on a larger scale. Trunks spilled over with cosmetics. Bobby pins decorated the floor like land mines, every barefooted step a risk. Hundreds of magazine pictures decorated the walls, cut to pieces on many an idle Sunday afternoon, so no matter where you stood, it felt like eyes and pouty lips followed you, studied you. Lily spotted a pair of lacy knickers, decidedly not her own, on her bed. She unthinkingly swept them to the floor and climbed up onto her mattress.

Two of the beds – Emmeline and Marlene’s – had been pushed together to form a massive plane on which the three girls sprawled: Marlene shuffling her tarot cards, Emmeline stretching out her back, and Mary ignoring her open textbook in favor of staring at the ceiling. They were all beautiful, all flushed with the aura of youth. Lily and her friends were the same age, yet they never commanded a room as powerfully.

Lily greeted them, earning their absent acknowledgement in return, all too engrossed in whatever Emmeline was saying to pay her any mind.

A yowl and the aptly-named Ricochet, Mei-Lin’s cat, burst out from beneath Mary’s bed. In dogged pursuit was Mary’s cat, Frannie, who she’d never seen fit to spay would go into regular frenzies of lust at the smell of Mei-Lin’s coddled tabby. It was the sorest source of tension in the dormitory, though Lily wasn’t sure the others had even noticed how Mei-Lin burned to a cinder when she saw her cat harassed. Of course, Mary was patently disinclined to care about anything, so she may have
noticed but opted to ignore it.

Ricochet skittered behind Mei-Lin’s legs, hissing and spitting his fury. Frannie made a few false starts, testing Ricochet, before she was off again, pouncing over Mei-Lin’s bed and leaving a dirty pawprint on the sheets in the process. Trapped, Ricochet pressed tightly to the wall. Twin circles of hot color bloomed on Mei-Lin’s cheeks.

“Mary, can’t you control Frannie?” Lily asked, hoping to keep the peace.

“Control her? What for?” Mary drawled.

Ricochet scratched at Frannie’s hind with a trimmed claw. Deciding she’d had enough, Mei-Lin scooped Ricochet up into the sanctuary of her arms and retired to her bed. The bed curtains closed definitively behind her. The only one who even seemed to notice was Emmeline, who looked a beat too long at Mei-Lin’s hiding place.

“All I’m saying,” Marlene said, resuming their previous conversation, “is that it would drive me mad.”

“Same. You’d find me, clumps of hair all over the floor from where I tore it out with my bare hands and wearing my trousers as a hat. I couldn’t stand it,” Emmeline agreed.

“Sounds stressful to be you,” Mary said.

Inserting herself into the gossip of her dormmates wasn’t natural for Lily. They were friends without being friends, all talk restricted to classwork and clubs. (The Astrological Society with Marlene and the Dueling Society with Emmeline.)

Lily licked her dry lips and said, “What are you all talking about?”

Lily hoped she was imagining the collective intake of breath, the pause, as if the three girls were sharing some silent judgment on her interruption. Another beat passed, and Emmeline coughed. They seemed to come to a collective decision because the air itself loosened, became more breathable.

“We’re talking about how Sirius snogged Rivera on Friday, and Mary doesn’t seem to care!” Marlene answered, all outrage.

“I thought you and Black were together,” Lily said to Mary.

With a triumphant cheer, Marlene cried, “Exactly!”

Mary didn’t deign to look at them. The only sign she’d heard the conversation around her was the arch of one of her imperious, dark eyebrows. Will had once said that ninety percent of Mary’s communication was through her eyebrows, and they only conveyed one emotion: cool superiority.

“She’s never been with Sirius,” Emmeline corrected, kindly turning to face Lily and include her more fully in the conversation.

She’d stopped stretching, but there was always a sense of unsettlement whenever Emmeline was indoors. It was like she held her breath each time she entered a building, only exhaling and breathing anew when she escaped outdoors once more. Now, she kept cracking her knuckles in an ugly chorus.

“Been, like sex?” Lily clarified.
“Like, I’ve never contemplated dating Sirius exclusively,” Mary explained. Her tone was even, expression passive, and yet she dripped with derision at Lily’s naivete. Been like sex, pfft.

Honestly, Lily said, “That’s too bad. You two look good together.”

Marlene flew into a sitting position. “Thank you! They are so hot together. It’s disgusting.”

A compelling argument could be made that Mary was the fittest girl at Hogwarts, and Lily didn’t have to wrack her brain to know that Sirius was the most attractive boy she’d ever seen. They were both dark-haired and fine-boned. Where Sirius was pale and tall, Mary was gold-brown skin and a slap-in-the-face of curves on a 155-centimeter frame. Their children would be the most beautiful, haughty half-bloods to ever grace Hogwarts’ halls.

Again, Emmeline clarified, “Mary and Sirius shag and talk, and then, turn around and shag other people. It’s an incomprehensible system, but it seems to work for them. Seems being the imperative word there.”

Marlene heaved a sigh. “If I had a bloke like Sirius… well, I’d never so much as look at another guy again.”

“Didn’t you say the same thing about Tobias Bare? Before the holidays?” Lily asked, casting back to a meeting of the Astrological Society that Marlene had commandeered to focus exclusively on her compatibility with the older Ravenclaw.

“Yeah, and she cheated on him within a week, too,” Mary said snidely, launching Marlene into a heated defense as to why snogging Dylan O’Reilly didn’t technically qualify as cheating.

Lily fast lost interest. She hadn’t chosen to engage her roommates for the first time in nearly a month to hear gossip about the seventh-year boys. The real reason for her visit weighed heavy in the pocket of her robes. Casually, she pulled out the starfish and placed it onto the stack of folded blankets that sat neatly on the edge of her bed. Placed there, it looked tacky, an ornament her grandmother would use to decorate the loo.

It was Emmeline who noticed Lily’s silent declaration, eyes widening in comprehension. The slick excitement of being proven right lit Lily up from the inside; she’d known her dormmates would have received the same invitation when Marlene finally stopped badgering Mary about her total faithfulness as a girlfriend, the latter didn’t seem remotely surprised, but Marlene bounded off the bed to toy with the starfish, spinning it around between her fingers and poking at the fine spines.

“I can’t believe you were invited,” Marlene squealed in a way that managed to not sound like an insult. “And a starfish, too! Mine turned into a seahorse, not a real one obviously, but like a statue. They like to keep with the whole underwater theme, you know?”

“Cool,” Lily said, infusing as much warmth into her voice as she could to encourage Marlene to keep talking.

“They’re not very good at the theme,” Mary said. “Grindylows only live in fresh-water, and they’re passing out starfish and seahorses.”

Emmeline took a bit of offense to Mary’s observation. “What? You want them to pass out rocks? Trout? There aren’t many options if you limit it to fresh-water. Did you want your invitation to transform into a real, live Grindylow?”

Mary didn’t frequently laugh, but when she did, she barked, and the sounds of her mirth rose through the room and frightened the cats.
“Yes! People should have to fight off a Grindylow hellbent on strangling them if they want to come to the party. A guaranteed way to gatekeep the unworthy.”

“Is this your first party, Lily?” Marlene continued. “It’s brill. You’ll have so much fun. Mei-Lin, were you invited?”

No answer came from behind the floral curtain of Mei-Lin’s tester, which Marlene interpreted as evidence that not only had Mei-Lin not been invited, but she was also devastated by the snub. Marlene was all sympathy for Mei-Lin’s plight, her lips in a smile that read like a frown.

“I’ve never been invited, and I don’t understand why I was now. I mean, why invite me and not Mei-Lin?” Lily said, giving voice to a question that had irked her since she first read the invitation. She wasn’t wildly popular – well-liked, but in a muted easily dismissed way. Well-liked was how Will had described Constance earlier, and his explanation of the difference between popularity and likability didn’t leave Lily enthused to fall into the latter category.

“Why do the Grindylows do anything?” Marlene answered with a shrug. “There are some regulars you always see, people they always invite, but others come and go depending on how big they want the party to get. This one feels like it’s going to be the party of the spring, so it makes sense they’re spreading the invitations.”

“Regulars? Like who?” Lily queried immediately. If she were a dog, her ears would have twitched in eagerness at this pristine opening.

“Don’t worry, Lily. You’ll know lots of people there. Everyone who matters gets an invitation, so the three of us always go,” Marlene reassured her.

“So, the three of you…” Lily said, brushing off the implication that she had only just began to matter. “Who else? Other Gryffindors?”

At the repeated question, Emmeline looked up at her sharply. Under the disfiguring effects of the dim lights, Lily couldn’t decipher her expression, but the urgency of her movement was easy to read. Lily wet her suddenly dry lips.

Oblivious, Marlene prattled on, “Sure. You’ll see half the seventh-years – O’Hannigan, Curtis, that whole group – and then, you’ll see the boys. Definitely, James. Peter, Remus and Sirius. I think they’ve been on the shortlist even longer than us. Right, Mare? They started going in like third-year?”

The way Marlene stressed the Marauders’ attendance left Lily blushing and uncharacteristically nervous, wondering if she might suspect Lily’s vested interest in whether James would be there or anywhere else. Lily and James had crossed the obscure boundary between animosity and flirtation about three months back, and others had likely taken notice of the change in their dynamic. Emmeline snapped a hair tie between her fingers and began to string up her long auburn hair into a ponytail that sat jauntily atop her head, watching Lily all the while. Jolted, Lily remembered that Emmeline had dated James all through fifth-year, a detail that had been irrelevant when she was young and found James obnoxious but now struck her as information of the utmost importance.

“I don’t know whether I’ll be coming.” Lily blustered. Her words had the desired effect, and all three girls snapped to disbeliefing attention.

“Seriously?” Mary questioned at the same time Emmeline said, “No one ever turns down an invite to a Grindylow party.”
“Clearly, they do,” Lily said, addressing Emmeline.

Finally, Emmeline looked away, manufacturing a sudden interest in the hem of her pajamas and said, “I understand that you’re an individual and all, but don’t you think…well, don’t you think that’s being a little too aggressively different than everyone else.”

Where to even start to answer that? “Aggressively different” made it sound like she made it a point of order to always diverge from her classmates when she did nothing of the sort. It was coincidence, no one’s fault, that her interests differed so radically from her peers’, and while she didn’t allow the disparity to injure her self-esteem, she didn’t take any pleasure in it either.

Normally, at this juncture in a conversation with her roommates, Lily would retreat to her bed and the privacy of her own thoughts. It was no coincidence that all her friends – past and current – were people unafraid to speak decisively on their feelings; they were the only people who didn’t tire her. The process of weeding through people’s motivations and the intent behind their words didn’t come naturally to Lily. The circuitous way her roommates sometimes spoke could leave her with a headache from the strain of trying to parse out all their hidden meanings.

Her year one primary teacher had despised Lily for her inability to read a room. The crotchety, old Mrs. Barton believed her role to be less about the introduction of letters and arithmetic and more the fostering of polite standards of behavior. She would loom, silent and imposing, at the back of the class where she could oversee the many small heads bent over their assignments. Unlike Lily’s teacher from the year before in infant school, Mrs. Barton didn’t articulate her expectations: pressed collars, straight-backed posture, a raised hand and a polite ma’am before asking a question. She simply expected all of her students to understand the basic rules of etiquette and that a tilt of her head indicated displeasure, a need to correct your behavior at once.

And Lily simply couldn’t.

She couldn’t begin to decipher the hidden meanings behind Mrs. Barton’s stares. While Mrs. Barton would grow taller in fury, Lily would prattle on about the turtle she’d drawn in her notebook without the slightest idea that anything was amiss. There were constant calls to her parents, tears from her mum about how she’d raised such a troublemaker, about how Petunia was so well-behaved in comparison. All the while, Lily sat, shame-faced and knowing she’d failed her mother, but unable to discern how she could have done anything differently. At the end of the year, a note had been made in her school file that she was a “troubled child, who reveled in disobedience and flouting expectations.”

Everything changed for the better in second-year with the far more understanding Mrs. Unger. One day during play hour, she held Lily back. Mrs. Unger showed Lily a few dozen images of people’s faces – people of all ages, colors, and dress – and requested that Lily guess at the emotions each person displayed. Of the 48 images Mrs. Unger shared with Lily, she accurately identified fourteen, well below the average. After that, there was another call to her parents, this time of a much different nature, in which they discussed Lily’s difficulties in interpreting the emotions of others. It left her parents scratching their heads, the news that their daughter could only read a face with extreme efforts, a literacy most people took for granted. Ultimately, they decided to proceed as normal. Other than Mrs. Unger taking extra pains to be explicit in her directions to Lily that year, no one ever acknowledged her struggles, and when she’d entered Hogwarts, she’d forgotten about the experience entirely.

So it was that Lily often distanced herself from her roommates and the codes beneath their stories and compliments. For once, Lily was one of them, harboring her own hidden motivations as she fished for information on the Grindylows, so she resisted the urge to announce she was going to bed and
gave them her full attention.

“Should I come, then? I just don’t know much about the Grindylows, what they’re all about, so I
guess they’ve always seemed strange to me, suspicious,” Lily said.

Mary rolled her eyes. “We’ve been going to these things forever. I promise they’re not planning to
sacrifice you in the woods or anything like that. The Grindylows just want to party and have fun.
Not exactly malevolent stuff.”

“Well, that’s the other thing!” Lily said. “The Forbidden Forest doesn’t sound like a great locale for a
party! We’re totally going to get caught!”

Now they all laughed, and Lily, who sought the truth like a drowning man searched for oxygen,
rankled at being so obviously in the dark.

“No one’s going to break up the party.” Emmeline said firmly and with the grace to try to suppress
the laugh in her throat at Lily’s ignorance.

“How? It’s not easy to hide a party happening right in the middle of the grounds after curfew.”

Marlene grinned. “Lily, no one will bother us because just about all the professors are in on it.”

It wasn’t enough to print, hardly a story at all, and yet Lily felt a rush of horror and discovery.
Everything made so much more sense with this new knowledge – assuming it was true –, how the
Grindylows had been permitted to exist in secrecy, flouting school rules and yet never pursued by the
professors. It felt like a betrayal, too. The professors enforcing a different set of rules for a secret
group of students was the definition of unfair. To imagine such antics from some of her professors
wasn’t a stretch — Slughorn and his club of favorite students came to mind — but Lily couldn’t
fathom McGonagall making the same exemptions. And yet, clearly, she had.

“Dumbledore wouldn’t…” Lily began.

“The Grindylows recruit based on two things,” Mary interrupted her. “Popularity, because they want
to have a good time, and brightness. They want the students who are going to go on and become
something. In his own time, of course, Dumbledore was a member.”

Seeing Lily’s puckered brow, Emmeline said, “Lily, there’s no conspiracy here. Don’t you think it’s
for the best that students have a chance to have fun without worrying that the professors will descend
upon them? The Grindylows do a service for the school.”

Maybe the reason she’d never been invited before wasn’t so mysterious. Pretty and active as she
was, Lily had never been present on the party scene. She’d only been to two parties in her life, while
Marlene made it sound as if she partied as frequently as she bathed.

The first had been with her ex-boyfriend, an affair in the Ravenclaw dormitory that he’d dragged her
to and immediately regretted. He kept abandoning her there amid a room full of people she didn’t
know to take the piss with his mates. The whole thing had ended in an enormous row, one which
resulted in her announcing that they would not be shagging for the first time that night as initially
planned. A move she’d immediately regretted as she didn’t like politicizing sex. It had taken him a
week to get her back on board and in bed, and he’d never been keen to take her to a party after that.
Then, there was a party in her hometown last summer, where all of her former classmates had
forgotten she was a freak — the girl with the dead mum who always made impossible things happen
in primary — and gotten her devastatingly drunk on rum that tasted like fermented piss. She’d
laughed outrageously loud under the flickering beam of light in the basement where the party was
held, surrounded by unfinished granite walls and the stench, sweet and sour like something off a Chinese menu, of the spliff everyone was smoking.

“Okay, I’ll come,” Lily said, like she was doing the other girls an enormous favor rather than pursuing her own agenda. “Like you said, I can hang out with all of you or Remus and James.”

“Ugh, James is going to be so obnoxious,” Mary muttered, and then to address Lily’s confusion, “It’s also his birthday, so we can expect shenanigans of some sort. My money’s on fireworks.”

Lily didn’t — couldn’t — engage in the banter about James and his proclivity for unpredictable stunts because her limbs had gone immobile, not unlike she’d been struck by a freezing charm. She was unbelievably thick. Just yesterday, she’d questioned James about the mysterious reasons he wouldn’t throw a party that year, and yet she’d never connected the invitation she’d received the same night. The Saturday of the Grindylows party marked James’ seventeenth birthday. The same James who was both popular and overflowing with potential to do great things, who clearly knew that a party would be thrown on Saturday, long before invitations were sent out to the broader public. The same James who fancied Lily, who had just received her first ever invitation to a Grindylow party.

There were other possible explanations for these coincidences, but Lily didn’t consider them. Sometimes an idea struck to the very core of you, like a perfectly sung, resonant note, and you simply knew it to be true. Eyes and mouth wide and round like three sickles, Lily accepted the truth that would lead her for the many months of investigation to come: James Potter hadn’t cancelled his birthday party. James Potter was a member of the Grindylows.

Chapter End Notes

Many of you called it but still. This sets the ball in motion, all the cards on the table as it were.

Just fun facts: Wasn’t paying attention as I transcribed a bit of this from my notes (was watching Hunt for the Wilderpeople), and typed “A compelling argument could be made the Lily was the fattest girl at Hogwarts” instead of Mary as the fittest. Would have made for a very different paragraph.
Chapter Notes

Over 5,000 words dedicated to our first significant Lily/James interaction! And I wrote like, 3,000 additional words that ultimately got cut. I really felt this chapter was pivotal in setting up these two darlings moving forward. Hope it doesn’t disappoint!

Compared to my past work, I’m trying to become more fluid in jumping from scene to scene within one chapter. Not sure I have that down yet, actually I’m sure I don’t, but bear with me as I learn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When McGonagall announced that they would be pairing up in groups of three for the day’s classwork, the whole class groaned in tandem. For a moment, they were all lifted by the unity that draws up between a group of seventeen-year-olds against the tyranny of the teacher, but the dread facts of mathematics broke the tie that momentarily bound them together. There were eighteen students but only eleven Gryffindors, meaning one group would be condemned to a partnership with a Slytherin.

Knowing the way the groups always divided, waiting passively was a surefire death sentence. Lily sensed – or possibly imagined – Severus watching her. The natural breakdown of the groups was as follows: Mary, Marlene and Emmeline would pair; three of the Marauders would band together; the leftover Marauder would join up with his remaining roommates – Duane and Khalid; Finally, Lily and Mei-Lin would partner, leaving their group with an opening for a Slytherin.

The grating sound of chairs scraping on stone resounded as students rose from their seats. Motivated, Lily spun around to see James already talking animatedly with Peter and Sirius.

“James!” Lily called out, capturing his attention. “Want to start our partnership early?”

Alarmed, Peter Pettigrew watched as his ideal trio fragmented. James stood, stretching languorously, so that the folds of his robes parted and revealed the cut of his hip, and walked over to join Lily at the front of the class. He didn’t come alone. Without prompting, Sirius strode over as well. Lily’s mystery-loving heart skipped a beat. She couldn’t have asked for a better opportunity because if James was a Grindylows, Sirius must be as well.

In fractions, the practice was to find the lowest common denominator. You could divide the Marauders down to Sirius and James (though they might hem and haw about loving all their friends equally) but no further. Where James went, Sirius followed and vice versa. Indivisible.

Which didn’t mean they never spent any time apart. Sirius would go on one of his brooding trips, skulking in corners, while James soared through the skies on his broom, impervious to life’s pitfalls. Sirius would snog Mary in the Astronomy Tower, while James holed up in the library to study. Sirius would visit with Remus in the Hospital Wing, while James battled Peter to see who could stand on one foot for longer. But they carried the other with them wherever they went.

“Call us your knights in well-tailored robes,” Sirius proclaimed once he drew near, “here to help you from failing your assignments.”
“I’m sure Lily could manage just fine on her own,” James said, which was blatantly untrue, but Lily loved him for it.

“Huang, do you mind?” Sirius said, gesturing to the chair that Mei-Lin still occupied.

Lily winced. Her perfect opportunity was Mei-Lin’s nightmare. Not only would she be forced to pair with a Slytherin, but she lost Lily as a buffer. Mei-Lin gave Sirius the small, tight smile that people often misinterpreted as gracious and abandoned her chair. She didn’t so much as look at Lily as she crossed the room to Khalid and began to scope out the leftover Slytherin with which she would be saddled.

Lily’s first month at Hogwarts had been a wondrous adventure. Glowing every day with the newness of it, Lily had flitted from class to class with Severus at her side. September came and went, and the introduction of October brought something new: homesickness. Lily had never anticipated that she’d long so powerfully for the home where Petunia nagged her and the neighbors called her a freak, where the air crackled with heat in the summers, roasting her alive as she sweat atop her sheets at night, and where she shivered in front of the stove during the winters. Yet come October, she grew nostalgic. It truly was like a sickness, her limbs growing sluggish, a churning in her stomach like she’d eaten something that disagreed with her.

One day when she’d returned to bed, she found a piece of licorice on her pillow. The next night, a caramel toffee. For weeks, she was gifted a new piece of candy, like she’d lost all her milk teeth at once and earned endless visits from the tooth fairy. She’d lie, propped on her pillows, and revel in the sticky sweetness, sugar coating her fingertips and at great risk of rotting her teeth right out of her mouth. While the brands differed, the taste of a chocolate frog was identical to Cadbury milk chocolate, and when she closed her eyes, she could imagine she was at the corner store, taking tiny nibbles to make it last the whole walk home.

Too curious to allow the mystery behind these wonderful treasures to last, Lily had devised a plan to spot out the generous gifter by Halloween. It was Mei-Lin, of course. Considerate, observant Mei-Lin, who had recognized in Lily the same sadness that had kept her awake since the night of their arrival. Never expecting thanks or recognition, Mei-Lin had stepped up to do the little she could to lift Lily’s spirits.

Their friendship had been inevitable after that. Lily would be forever grateful for the moments of familiarity that Mei-Lin had gifted her, never fully recognizing how she would save Mei-Lin – until that point friendless – in return. Of all her friends, Lily loved Mei-Lin best, so it was a simple matter to suffer through Mei-Lin’s isolationist tendencies, the way she pushed others away and grew churlish when Lily didn’t choose her above all others.

Lily sighed. At the rate things were going, she would need to lower herself on bended knees and beg Mei-Lin for forgiveness.

Sitting beside her, Sirius and James took up a lot of space. Sirius flung an arm out and wrapped it around the back of Lily’s chair, so that she could feel the heat of him against her shoulders. Seated across from her, James’ legs stretched across the length of the desk, and his knee bumped against hers as is wiggled idly. And the way they took up space wasn’t just physical. They both had auras that seemed to expand past their persons and envelop her in the bubble of their charisma. Separately, both of them had an impressive presence, but combined, she felt like she was transported into another world, one played on their terms, where problems were solved with a wave of a wand and people snapped to attention at the laziest gesture. It was a different kind of power than Lily typically sought, but she found it intoxicating all the same, grew taller along with them.

“Can I say that you’re looking very pretty today, Evans? Did you do something different?” Sirius
said puckishly.

“I could ask you the same,” Lily said. “You’re looking very pretty as well.”

“Yes, actually. Thank you for taking notice. It’s my new lip gloss. Want a taste?” Sirius said with a girlish bat of his eyes. He couldn’t pretend his words were for Lily’s benefit for more than a second, immediately glancing to James to assess how he would respond.

Apparently not the jealous type, James didn’t so much as flinch at Sirius’s overwrought flirting. Instead, he said, “You really do look nice today, Lily.”

And while Sirius had said the same, she found it far more gratifying coming from James. Sirius’s flirting was par for the course. Gender, age, or creed, it didn’t matter to Sirius. When interacting with anyone but his precious Marauders, he’d use the same brand of irreverent, near-patronizing flirtation. She’d once witnessed him flirt with the subjects of a portrait. If he wasn’t compensating for something, Lily would break her own wand.

In comparison, James had matured. The last year had seen his voice drop an octave and his self-control, once the barest sapling, flourish into something mighty. James’ flirting in the past had always fallen into one of two categories: either mean or sweeping. He’d either flirt with her to irritate her or in the broad way he noticed every girl his age. In the past few months, he’d grown subtler, his attentions targeted, so that she felt special every time he so much as looked at her.

Lips puckered and expression expectant, Sirius still waited for her rejoinder to his offer, so Lily said, “I don’t know Sirius. What would Charlene Daniels think?”

“Been keeping up about me, Evans? I’m honored,” Sirius said, beaming with pride that she’d taken an interest in gossip for once.

“You shouldn’t be impressed.” James snorted. “The whole school knows about your sluggish ways. They’re going to put yon a public health poster soon.”

In retaliation, Sirius turned to Lily, “Ignore the speccy git. He’s just jealous of my busy social life. See, he’s spent all his free time lately with his nose in a book, like an absolute swot, so he’s forgotten what sunshine and snogging feel like.”

“What free time? I spend all day babysitting you, you tosser,” James said.


“Oh, dozens of them really. You know how I’m taking that private study with Malloy this year? Well, initially it was supposed to be focused on inventing spells, which was cool enough, but to really make a go of it, you have to understand the theory behind it all. So, I’ve been reading up on everything, beyond the swish-and-flick stuff we normally learn here. It’s just a hunch right now, but I think I’m getting close to something,” James said.

He waved his hands about energetically as he talked, and an entire tale of passion and enthusiasm centered in his demonstrative hands. She could see the nights spent reading under a blanket so as not to disturb his roommates, the way his eyes would widen, and he’d clumsily search for a quill when he uncovered something meaningful and new in his book, the margins of his notes, turned inky black with the observations he’d crammed into the limited space. It would be a simple thing to swap him out in her imaginings for herself, the two of them joined in their shared passion for discovery.

She wanted to tell Sirius that James had nothing to be embarrassed about. She wanted to tell James that she thought him simply marvelous.
“James always needs a project, you see. This is his new one,” Sirius said.

“What did you work on in the past?” Lily asked.

Sirius and James shared a look. Then, a chuckle. They had no intention of sharing, and Lily suspect James’ projects often tested the limits of school policy.

Since they weren’t going to clue her in, Lily returned to the original subject. “The only reason I know a thing about you and Charlene is because the girls were talking about it in the dormitory last night.”

“Really? What did they say?” Sirius drawled the words as casually as he could, but his posture betrayed him. For just a moment, he’d sat up straighter, alert.

They way he said “they” read like “she,” so Lily replied, “Not much. They didn’t seem that interested. But who knows.”

It was the wrong answer, not that Lily realized or understood why. Irritated, Sirius glanced over to where Mary was partnered with her dormmates, willing her to notice him with the force of his stare. She didn’t so much as flinch, remaining perfectly unaware that she was the object of Sirius’s intense study.

“I’m telling you, Pads, it’s never going to happen,” James said, amiable in the face of his best friend’s disappointment. Once again, he leaned in with a lowered tone to explain the situation to Lily. Sirius and James were mostly doing this for each other’s benefit, talking aloud to embarrass each other, but Lily couldn’t help but warm at feeling included for once. “Sirius wants to hear that Mary was driven into a fit of jealousy over him. I keep telling him that Mary Mac doesn’t feel normal human emotions like jealousy, but he won’t listen.”

“I thought you two weren’t exclusive,” Lily said.

“Well, yeah, but don’t you think she could be a little less happy about the situation?” Sirius said.

“You want her to be unhappy?” Lily clarified, bewildered.

Complicated and ever-changing, loud one day and then muted the next, the relationship between Mary and Sirius had never been easy for Lily to follow. There was one weekend towards the beginning of the year, quintessential for the couple, which had left Lily with emotional whiplash as she tried to sort through the unfolding drama. The Friday had begun with the two snogging in the Entrance Hall. By Transfiguration, Mary was refusing to look at Sirius as he lobbed increasingly feverish insults at her. The Saturday began with Sirius escorting Elia Montague to Hogsmeade. By nightfall, Mary was sitting in his lap, helping him cheat at cards with nary a sign of their previous row. And this was typical for them!

Had anyone ever bothered to ask for Lily’s opinion on the matter, she would have urged them both to run screaming in opposite directions and never look back.

Sirius flipped through his notes. From the bit Lily could see, it was a wasted effort as his notes contained nothing but sketches, the vast majority erring on the obscene. They’d been tasked with transfiguring the front-end of a newt into a pepper-shaker and the back-end into a tissue. It was impossible: the two sides wouldn’t meld together naturally, tissue was the exact opposite consistency of a newt, and an object simply couldn’t be two things at once. Some things had to be viewed in absolutes, and matter was one of them as far as Lily was concerned.

“You want to give it a go?” James offered. The talented prat probably could have snapped off the
spell with his eyes closed.

“Not really.” Lily grumbled, but she was already reaching for her wand.

Unexpectedly, the hardest part of their assignment turned out to be controlling the newt. Just as Lily raised her arm to cast, the newt took flight. Staring at it straight on, the newt seemed to glide, smooth and flat as a snake along the desk; it looked like a long stain of spilled ink. From the side, however, Lily could see its little legs wiggling frantically to propel itself toward freedom. Lily slammed her palms flat to stop its progress. The wily thing corrected course by crawling over her hands, and Lily couldn’t react fast enough to catch it as it slid slickly from her grasp. Lily had assumed the newt would feel slimy and smooth to the touch. She’d been right on the first count; it was slimy, but also somewhat rough textured, with almost imperceptible ridges lining its body.

Deftly, James scooped the newt out of Lily’s loose fingers and cradled it close to him. Its vibrant red skin reminded Lily of a matador’s flag, and she was the bull baited by a teasing wannabe salamander.

Once more, Lily raised her wand, and once more, the newt broke free. Though to be fair, it looked like James tossed the poor thing at the last moment to ensure chaos. Sirius laughed and brought his books down heavily to herd the newt into place, only the newt lunged so the books landed with horrible force upon its tail. Lily and Sirius both screamed in genuine horror as the tail broke right off.

The newt didn’t pause for a second to mourn the loss of its appendage, scuttling away. Sirius picked up the detached tail, long as a pencil and thinner than her pinky finger, only to fling it away from his body, pelting Lily in the cheek. Screaming and carrying on like they were on fire, their trio had the undivided attention of the class.

“It’s a newt! The tail will grow back!” James said. He was laughing so hard that tears leaked from his eyes.

Like a mantra, Lily wailed, “Oh my God! Oh my God!” on repeat.

“Poor, sweet Agnes. She had such a lovely tail,” James snickered, to which Sirius let out a near hysterical, “Don’t name her!”

This time, when James caught the newt, he didn’t release it. He held the animal tight to his chest, cooing apologies and promising that he would keep it safe from his barbarous partners. Lily buried her face in her hands and tried to focus on her breathing, on not collapsing into a heap at the trauma of it all. In response to McGonagall’s accusing attention, James said something – probably witty and irreverent – but it sounded like a dull buzzing in her ears. Sirius was so overwrought that he had to leave the room, knocking his chair to the ground in the process and not looking back.

Steady heads kneaded her shoulders. Lily wasn’t one to catalogue every time a boy touched her, so she wasn’t certain it constituted the most physical contact she’d ever had with James; but, she was willing to bet it was. His hands weren’t warm but hot, blazing and large enough that his thumbs could dip into the crevices of her clavicles with rough little circles that loosened her muscles. Her eyes closed again, not because she couldn’t bear to face the world but because she was in danger of falling asleep.

Drawing every ounce of willpower she could boast, Lily opened her eyes and pulled subtly away from James’ questing hands. Immediately, he drew back, respectful. He’d transfigured his textbook into a glass vase, which contained the newt.

“Well, that was a little too much excitement,” Lily said breathlessly.
“No such thing.”

“Tell me something. A funny story to calm me down,” Lily cajoled.

Listening to his voice, distracting and deep, always did wonders for her. Granted, it tended to speed her heart up, not down.

“Afraid not, Evans. I don’t just go around passing out my great stories like candy. I need quid pro quo. Tell me something shocking about yourself. Impress me,” James challenged.

There was no shortage of precocious to outrageous stories from her childhood. The summer after her mum died, Lily had spent a lot of time alone, inventing ways to entertain herself that would have put her mum in the ground a second time if she could only see her youngest daughter.

“Alright, so when I was nine, I’d just seen my first James Bond film – he’s like a muggle auror but secret, if that makes sense? – and I became properly obsessed with spies. I read all the books, watched all the films, the works. Well, it gives you a very skewed perspective of how likely certain events are. Namely, I really thought someone was going to kidnap me and slap me in a pair of cuffs or a straitjacket. So, naturally, as nine-year-olds do, I decided to learn to dislocate my shoulder, so I could escape when the inevitable happened.”

James legitimately gasped. “Lily, no!”

Nodding animatedly, Lily said, “I’m afraid so. I spent like a week working up to it, banging my shoulder off all the furniture. There was this log swing in the park, and when it really got going, it went up to my shoulder. I’d run it back and forth until it had some good momentum, then, stand with my back to it and let it thwack me in the shoulder. That wasn’t enough, so I tied my entire collection of Encyclopedia Britanica – and those are heavy books – to the top. It was finally heavy enough and bam! Dislocated my shoulder.”

“I’ve broken a lot of bones but never done that,” James admitted. “I’ve heard it hurts.”

“Horrifically,” Lily said, chewing into the horror of the story. “I came home sobbing. My arm was numb, couldn’t move it at all. And you have to understand, the Evans family doesn’t go to the hospital. The only person home was my sister, Petunia, who was understandably furious. To set the scene, she’s only twelve. There’s no adult supervision. The only thing we know is we have a mandate to never call my father at work. Well, of course, Petunia decides she’ll just reset it herself.”

James turned ashen. He mouthed another “no.”

“She puts a bag of peas in my mouth, so I can bite down or something, like we’re in a war, has me brace against the wall with my good arm and then slams my back until the shoulder pops back in. And let me tell you, I thought the sound as it dislocated was disgusting, but the sound going back in was so much worse! I bawled my eyes out. Honestly, I’m incredibly lucky though. Petty easily could have torn the surrounding muscle, but she did a good job of it. My shoulder was black and blue for three weeks, but it healed.

Phantom pain tormented her. The memory of that splintering, mind-quieting pain. Lily shook her arm a few times, making it go limp and loose until it hung, motionless, at her side.

“Well, I suppose you learned an important lesson,” James said, but the words were insincere. James had never much held with lessons.

Lily smiled. “Not really. The day the bruises cleared up, I went back and did it again. That time, I managed to dislocate it myself without help from the log. Figured the bad goys wouldn’t hold me
captive in front of a conveniently placed log swing.”

Something between a chuckle and a cry of pain escaped James’ lips. She grinned ear-to-ear as he struggled to process her story.

“You know, and I don’t say this lightly…you might just be the maddest person I know,” James said.

He looked at her like she was something marvelous, the eighth wonder of the world.

“But you know what, it all worked out in the end,” Lily boasted, “Because to this day, I can still dislocate my shoulder. So, when the time comes and someone tries to put me in handcuffs, watch out. The bad guys will be scratching their heads at the empty cuffs, while I jog down to the police station,” Lily boasted.

“Or you know, you could just use magic and keep your body parts intact,” James said dryly.

“Sounds like you will need saving when the Soviets take you,” Lily said, like it was a terrible pity.

“If I’m ever trapped in a straitjacket, at the mercy of some terrible villain, you have my permission to dislocate my shoulder for me,” James said solemnly.

Lily sniffed. “As if I’d bother.”

Time was slipping away from her. The chance to interrogate him for clues was disappearing. Yet Lily lost sight of her goals when she talked to James. Yes, the seconds moved just as quickly, but her perception slowed, time moved thick like molasses, sweet and warm. She wanted to hear his story in return.

“Your turn,” Lily said quietly.

James stroked at the shaved skin of his chin. “I wasn’t planning to give you one of my better stories, but I think you earned it with that one. Okay, let’s see…handcuffs, right, okay, so I’ve been in handcuffs exactly one time, and that was after I was arrested and taken to a muggle jail.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Lily muttered, only for James to shush her with a reminder that he hadn’t interrupted her story.

“So, it was the summer before our first year at Hogwarts,” James began.

“Wait! You were arrested when you were ten-years-old?” Lily interrupted.

“Shh! And I was eleven. As I was saying, it was the summer, and the lads down at the village were bored. There never is much to do in Stinchcombe, and there was some after-service event happening at the parish church, so all the adults were busy, leaving us little scoundrels to our own devices. A few days before, my mum had extracted the slime from our hive of billywigs, so I decided to sneak one down to the village, hidden in my pocket. Most days, the Fosters’ herd of cows were out to graze, but it was Sunday, and Mr. Foster was taking a nice lie-in, leaving his cows in the pen for an extra hour. One of the lads had the utterly brilliant idea – I’m so jealous it wasn’t mine, honestly – that a cow race would be just what our sleepy little town needed to wake up.”

This time it was Lily’s turn to utter, “James, no.”

“Oh, yes!” James grinned wickedly. “I hopped the fence, and one of the boys unpenned the gate that led straight to the village proper. A couple jabs with the billywig stinger, and trust me, it was furious from having been trapped in my pocket all morning, and the cows went mad. They set right off
through the village, like they were being hunted by wolves. Somehow, and I’m mad to this day that I
didn’t manage, one of the boys climbed onto one’s back and rode it for about a quarter of a mile
before he fell off. Sprained wrist, he was fine. Anyway, the whole town was drawn by the noise, just
herd of a dozen cows gone wild and a savage pack of boys running full-tilt alongside them, cheering
to raise a vampire from his coffin. Just about every adult set to corralling the cows, but we kept
getting underfoot, so the police put us in cuffs and dragged us to the station.”

Eyes closed, Lily could picture the scene. She still distinctly remembered what James looked like at
age eleven, and the other boys transformed into his dormmates – Sirius falling from a cow, Peter
huffing to keep up with the stampede. The stench would be foul; domineering. They’d trip over their
own feet, laugh louder than the adults could bellow for order. The whites of the cows’ eyes would be
milkier than their spotted hides, and, as they ran, udders would juggle and their ribs would poke
through. In her mind, they raced through an idyllic village, down a straight road that led to gray-
green pastures.

“So, they took us to wait in the station, put us – all eight of us – in the holding pen, while they waited
for their parents to arrive. They just wanted to frighten some manners into us. All the parents came
down and reamed their kids for it. My mate, Mark, was limping for days after the belting he got. And
then, my dad arrived, and I swear, the police looked more horrified when they saw how he dealt with
me than when the cows first stormed past. My dad didn’t even blink as I told him the whole gory
story. He’s not exactly one for stern, parental discipline. He just told me some facts about cattle and
took me home while the police gaped,” James said.

James proceeded to share those facts with her, how Gloucester bred a special breed of cow, unique
to the area and identifiable by the white stripe that ran down their backs to the tips of their tails. Most
anyone else would have faked interest, but there was nothing insincere about the look of rapt
attention on Lily’s face. She swelled with the joy of discovering something new about the world, and
James grew bright with the love a bookish boy has for sharing knowledge. Everything about his
story, from the roguishness of his antics to the lesson at the end was perfect.

“It was an exciting day,” James concluded.

Lily wanted to smile dumbly at him for another fifteen minutes or so, but she couldn’t afford to waste
any more time, so she asked, “So…on the subject of excitement, looking forward to the party on
Saturday?”

“Sure. Should be a good time. I can get blitzed and spend time with my mates. Can’t ask for much
more than that,” James shrugged. “Are you coming?”

“I was invited,” Lily said, purposefully offering as little information as possible. She’d read that
when faced with silence, people tended to overshare.

“Invited doesn’t mean you’re coming.”

Lily felt truly understood. Had she not decided to pursue the Grindylows for her investigation, she
probably would have declined on the party, not seeing the benefit of wasting a few hours at a party
where her closest friends in the world didn’t warrant an invite.

“Thank you!” Lily said. “Just yesterday, I said something like that to Emmeline, and she acted like I
was mad. Apparently, no one would dare turn down a coveted Grindylows invitation, and I’m
aggressively nonconformist or something for not seeing the value in some exclusive club that’s
ignored me and my friends for years!”

The vehemence of her rant surprised her. She hadn’t realized how irked she was by Emmeline’s
Again, James impressed her when he said, “Don’t worry about it. A Grindylows party is just a bunch of students getting drunk with a few theatrics thrown in to wow a crowd. You haven’t been missing out on much.”

His answer, impressive as it was, did give Lily a moment’s pause. James was a braggart who fed on praise and attention to his accomplishments, like Sirius drowned himself in whiskey, a flask always handy in his robes and a dose always snuck into his morning pumpkin juice. Given that James was a member of the Grindylows, he should have been quick to defend their significance because of how it reflected on him. Lily didn’t peg James for an effective secret keeper: his pranks never left any question to the identity of the perpetrators, and he’d strut down the corridors afterward with a twinkle in his eye designed to erase any lingering doubts.

“Should I take it you’re not coming, then?” James asked.

“Let me think…” Lily tapped her chin. “I have it on good authority that there will be some fit boys there…and I had no plans other than revision…”

James Cheshire Cat grinned. “Evans, I’m honored that my appeal is strong enough to draw you to a party. Honestly, I can die happy.”

“I was talking about Sirius.”

James pantomimed clawing his heart out, a zero-to-sixty transformation from cool to clown that delighted and stunned Lily simultaneously. Sirius slipped back into his seat while James was still feigning a heart attack, not acknowledging James’ theatrics for a second. He looked paler than Lily had ever seen him, like all the blood had been leeches from his veins; it was a feat as Sirius had the coloring of a vampire on a good day.

Skipping over questions about how he was feeling because Lily suspected they wouldn’t be appreciated, Lily reveled in her opportunity to inform Sirius about what he’d missed for once. “We were just discussing the Grindylows party on Saturday. It’s such a neat coincidence that it’s falling on James’ birthday, isn’t it?”

Sirius frowned. “Same day…is Saturday your birthday, mate?”

“Don’t fuck around. You didn’t forget,” James said.

“Of course not, just don’t be surprised when you don’t have a present from me this year,” Sirius said.

Offended that anyone could forget such an auspicious event, James continued to berate Sirius for “pretending” not to know his birthday. The two bickered back and forth. Meanwhile, Lily tried to determine how much of it was an act on Sirius’s part to irritate James and how much was a coordinated act on both their parts to throw her off the scent.

Trying again, Lily interrupted, “Oh! Is that why you cancelled your party? Because you didn’t want to compete with the Grindylows?”

“I told you, I have personal reasons for not wanting to focus on me this year,” James said flatly.

“Still! What a coincidence,” Lily pressed.

“That James’ birthday fell on a Saturday this year? Let me explain to you how the 365-day calendar year works. See, your birthday will land on a different day of the week each year because 365 isn’t
divisible by seven. Your birthday may even fall on a Saturday next year!” Sirius delivered all this with a raised eyebrow that suggested her intellectual competency was in doubt.

Rather than deigning to give a serious reply, Lily growled, “Lizard murderer” and turned away as Sirius gasped. They returned to their Transfiguration, Lily pink and flustered in her attempts to successfully transform the newt. Courageously, James held their subject in place by its lumpy bottom-half, ignoring the very real risk that Lily might misaim and catch his fingers up in her spell. In the end, Lily succeeded in transforming the entire newt into a pepper-shaker that couldn’t stand on its own because it was as flimsy as a tissue, a result that would have earned a ‘P’ on an exam.

James, effortless and without comment, transformed the newt back to its original state, only to perform the desired transfiguration perfectly. Like he did with everything else – flying, flirting, public-speaking – James made it seem like the simplest thing in the world. If Petunia saw it, she’d question why Lily even needed to go to school for witchcraft when magic appeared as easy as a blink of the eye. None of the practice or the mechanics were evident in James’ spellwork.

“Um…so, what kind of thing does a person wear to a Grindylows party? I’m assuming the uniform isn’t recommended,” Lily ventured, trying to subtly steer them back to her investigation.

“The less the better,” Sirius replied, winking. “A swimming costume would be best.”

“A swimming costume?” Lily replied archly, picturing herself developing frostbite while her peers pointed and jeers, all dressed in weather-appropriate jackets.

She looked to James for a refutation, but he said, “Absolutely. It’s a swimming party, you know? So a swimming costume is a must. Said so on the invitation.”

“Where? Was there something written on the back?”

Briefly, Lily considered the possibility that James was showing his hands a member of the Grindylows, revealing a secret about the party that no one outside the group would have reason to know. Her hope was dashed as she took note of James’ smile. In a word, Lily would describe it as lecherous.

Promptly, Lily plucked the newt-turned-pepper-shaker from Sirius’s grip and upturned it over James’ head. Sprinkles of spicy powder rained down onto his dark hair and dusted the shoulders of his robes. When the trickle began to slow, Lily banged on the bottom of the shaker to encourage the rest to fall like she might with a soon-empty bottle of ketchup.

Rather than fume at his mistreatment, James laughed uproariously, and Lily forget to feel offended as she joined him, intoxicated by that deep and unabashed sound. James shook his hair about like a dog, and the pepper pelted out from him in every direction.

“Seriously, Lily,” James said as his laughter died down. “Anything you wear is fine. You’ll look gorgeous regardless.”

Tragically, Lily realized she might have overestimated her ability to interrogate James for information because, with one easy compliment, he’d reduced her to a pile of mush, weak and warm as she met his sincere eyes.

“You should wear something green. It will flatter your eyes,” Sirius said. His words reached her as if through a plane of glass, like he was standing outside of her and James’ orbit, unaware of the barrier the head of the moment had erected around them.

James said. “She doesn’t need to dress to complement her eyes. They stand out all on their own.”
Lily swallowed.

Yes, she was in trouble.

It was Mei-Lin who struck upon the solution to the Lily-can’t-interrogate-James-without-turning-into-a-lovestruck-mess problem. If she couldn’t be trusted to speak to him, then she wouldn’t. She would follow him.

Easier said than done as it turned out.

All through dinner, Lily kept her eyes trained on James at the end of the table, to the point that few fourth-year girls nearby snickered knowingly. Lily ignored them and the prospect of the rumors they were sure to start. When James pushed up lazily from the table with Sirius and Remus, Lily was ready. They walked out of the Great Hlal, laughing and talking loudly as was typical for them. Left at the table alone, Peter pushed his vegetables around his plate.

Tracking the Marauders at a discrete distance wasn’t easy as they were all three long-legged and walked with a purposefulness that had Lily hurrying not to be left behind. They turned to ascend a flight of stairs that led to the professors’ private rooms, immediately piquing Lily’s suspicions. The tower was almost always left abandoned. A drum tower, the steps wound in a tight spiral and then released out onto a covered rampart. The three boys walked ahead, single-file. With no cover in sight, Lily ducked down and waited for them to gain some distance. They rounded the corner to another flight of stairs, this time descending down into the northeast courtyard, where Hufflepuffs often congregated on sunny days. Before they disappeared entirely from sight, Remus turned his head slightly to the left, enough so that if he had looked, he would have seen Lily crouched awkwardly pretending to tie a trainer. He gave no indication of having seen her and kept walking.

The chase continued in the same manner – the Marauders staying fifteen meters ahead and giving no indication they knew Lily was stalking their every step – until they’d covered half the bloody castle and Lily was slick with sweat. Then, the Marauders entered the one room where Lily didn’t dare follow: the boys’ loo. Not wanting to seem like she was lurking outside they boys’ lavatory, Lily waited in a bailey with a clear view of the lav.

She was winded from chasing them up and down flights of stairs. If this was how those boys spent their after-dinner hours, Lily knew how they maintained such healthy physiques. They’d taken the concept of a brisk, after-dinner walk and turned it into a marathon. It was no wonder Peter had opted not to join them.

A first-year drew near and struck up a conversation. Every year, Lily made it a point to help the incoming first-years of all houses find their way around the castle. She made a particular effort with the muggleborn students, explaining the most perplexing differences between wizarding and muggle culture, so they wouldn’t discover it as a shock like Lily did. For example, there was no laundry at Hogwarts because the elves managed all the washing. It was custom to throw dirty clothes to the ground each night and expect a neat set of robes to be packed in your trunk by morning. Or that everyone raised their nose at Portugal because the wizarding world had its own history of international relations and wizarding Great Britain and Portugal had been sworn enemies for nearly three centuries, something to do with magical creatures and export regulations. Or, most shocking of all, that the wizarding world was militantly irreligious, so there would be no chaplain or mass or prayer before meals and exclamations to God would be met with blank stares by young purebloods equally clueless about muggle culture.

The girl before her, Anne Merriweather, was one such instructee. Anne wanted to tell her about how
she’d finally sorted the rules for Quidditch and was practicing her flying to join the house team. Supportively, Lily listened and nodded along, but the whole time, she kept an eye trained on the door to the loo.

Shadows crept into the courtyard, slanting through the high windows as the sun made its sure descent. It quickly became the lantern lights that kept Anne’s face illuminated. The Marauders had been in the loo for nearly half an hour.

Lily bolted to her feet. There was no way they could have escaped whilst she was watching so carefully, which meant they were still in the loo, likely up to any sort of Grindylows business, and she was missing it with her dithering. With a kind parting word to Anne, Lily marched to the lavatory and burst inside with little consideration for its occupants.

No one was exposed, thankfully, but her entry was still met by high-pitched screams from the younger students. Two fifth-years looked her up and down and snickered to each other. The only people who didn’t respond were the Marauders. And that was because they weren’t there.

To be sure, Lily dropped to her knees and looked beneath the stalls, but the only pair of feet she spotted clearly belonged to a child.

“Have any of you seen James Potter, Remus Lupin, or Sirius Black?” Lily demanded of the startled crowd.

When they all answered in the negative, Lily stormed out, looking around wildly like they might still be lingering in sight, but they were long gone. Her mind scrambled for an explanation. They’d known she was trailing them from the start, their ignorance an act and their circuitous route through the castle designed to mess with her. Maybe there was a secret passageway in the boys’ loo. She’d heard rumors that Hogwarts was riddled with trapdoors and secret escape passages, so they could have slipped out through one. It certainly seemed more reasonable than the alternative: they possessed the power of invisibility.

Slowly, Lily’s frustration transformed, and a smile slid into place across her face. They probably considered this a victory over her, that they’d escaped without drawing her notice, but she was the one who’d won. Because now she knew without a shadow of a doubt that they were up to something. Up to something they didn’t want her to discover.

The next day, things ran just as smoothly. Neither James nor Remus nor Sirius were in Potions that morning. Alone, Peter hunched over his cauldron, silent and stewing in his abandonment. Ever the opportunist, Lily approached Peter, the weakest link, the vulnerable one.

He glanced about warily when Lily slid into place beside him, so she graced him with her most reassuring smile.

“Hullo, Peter. All alone today?”

“Yes.”

“That’s too bad. Nothing worse than class without your mates, huh?” Lily said chummily.

“I guess, yeah. It’s a bit boring. Usually I’m desperate for Sirius to stop talking for three seconds, but now…” Peter waved around like the silence in the air was explanation enough.

“Well, you should partner with me and Mei-Lin today. We don’t want you sitting over here all alone.
Besides, it’s not fair that you have to do all the brewing alone. It’s a two-person job,” Lily said.

Peter eagerly accepted and prattled on about he was usually so lucky because James was such an ace brewer as he’d all but grown up in a Potions workshop and he – Peter – had no idea how he would have managed without her help. She had him right where she wanted him.

“Tell me, where are all the others today anyway?” Lily asked after an appropriately lengthy amount of time had passed. It wouldn’t do to look to eager.

She kept her gaze fixed pointedly on the ladle she was stirring. Heat drifted up form the bowl of the ladle and her hand dampened with sweat.

“Hospital Wing,” Peter said, taciturn.

“How’d they managed that?” Mei-Lin asked, and Lily sent her a thankful smile as their interrogation would look far more natural when split between two people, like an actual conversation.

“Beats me,” Peter said.

“Oh, come on, Peter,” Lily said. “You can just say they were up to some prank, and you can’t tell us what. No one’s going to believe you don’t know what they were doing.”

It was the wrong move as Peter grew irritable, bristling and growing taller in his seat. “I don’t have the first clue what they were thinking yesterday.”

Lily and Mei-Lin shared a conspicuous glance over his head. Mei-Lin’s eyes screamed ‘what the hell is wrong with this boy’, and Lily silently agreed. Considering who his friends were, it was baffling that Peter could be so high strung. The ladle started to burn, so Lily switched hands, never considering that Peter or Mei-Lin might help; this was one of the only classes in which she excelled, after all.

“Why aren’t you with them? I mean, shouldn’t you suffer right alongside them? I always thought if one of you stubbed your toe, the other three all shouted ‘ow,’” Mei-Lin tried.

“So did I,” Peter said quietly, the most heartbreaking admission Lily had ever heard. “But I don’t have the first idea what would possess someone to go for a midnight swim in the Black Lake in March. It’s bloody Baltic! I could have told them they’d all catch hypothermia.”

Smashing. Lily could have kissed him.

“That’s probably why they didn’t invite you,” Lily said kindly. “They knew you’d tell them what a mad idea it was, and they didn’t want to hear reason.”

“Do you think so?” Peter asked hopefully. Hopefully and pitifully, like he was genuinely contemplating never warning his friends away from potential danger again if only they’d let him come along on their adventures.

For the rest of class, Lily buzzed with excitement, and when Slughorn allowed them to pack up, she practically sprinted to get out of earshot of Peter. Giggling, Mei-Lin stayed on her heels.

“First thing –” Lily said.

“I’m one step ahead of you!” Mei-Lin interrupted. “I’ll go to the Hospital Wing and see if anyone else has come down with a case of hypothermia.”
“Brilliant! And I’ll ask Filch and Hagrid whether there was anything suspicious down by the lake last night,” Lily agreed.

They both sailed away, like they were riding on a rainbow of discovery, but when they met again a few hours later to share their progress, it was with different spirits. Neither Filch nor Hagrid had noticed any strange activity the previous night, though Filch had kept Lily for nearly an hour detailing every minor infraction he’d witnessed that week. Worse, when Mei-Lin had arrived at the Hospital Wing, Pomfrey had already released the Marauders and refused to share the identities or medical statuses of her other patients in the name of confidentiality. While Mei-Lin was now certain that other students had come down with the same unlikely symptoms of hypothermia, she hadn’t the slightest who these mystery students might be. Like she was trying to convince herself, Lily optimistically pointed out that they were well on the path to discovery as they’d already learned something. There was no way the Marauders had decided to abandon Peter to his own devices unless there was a secret afoot.

The period after lunch found Lily sequestered from her friends and targets in Ancient Runes, but she was quick to join up with Will immediately after the class let out. Lily didn’t make it a habit to memorize her classmates’ schedules – though she would certainly look for an opportunity now that they had become her targets – but she knew that Remus could often be found alone in the library after two thirty, so that was where she and Will both headed, and that was where they found them.

Remus sat at one of the desks in the center of the library, head resting on the table in a display of weariness that was concerningly familiar to anyone who knew him. Everything about him was pale, no, colorless, like the life was being leached out of him, everywhere from skin to eyebrows to the whites of his eyes growing dull without a hint of the vibrancy that he showed when he grew passionate about a subject. Seeing him like that left Lily in the grip of an irrational fear, a fear that he might be dead at the table amidst the busy library with no one the wiser. His hand, gripping a quill and carefully scrawling notes even as his eyes remained shut, fortunately gave him away as a living, breathing boy.

Trying to remain inconspicuous, Lily plucked a random book from a shelf, holding the volume high so that she could peer covertly over the top. She nearly dropped it at the first touch, the spine was unexpectedly wet, soaked through with perspiration that dripped off the pages while magically managing not to obscure the text. A glance showed it was a book on weather charms, so Lily quickly swapped it for a book with less personality, worried that a strike of lightning might be next.

“You know there’s no reason to be so sneaky, right? There’s nothing suspicious about us hanging out in the library. Set aside your fantasies of being Hercules Poirot for a minute,” Will said lowly.

“It’s not like we can just sit down and start staring at him,” Lily murmured. Then, she added, “And I don’t fantasize about being Hercules Poirot.”

“Really? I’m surprised you didn’t show up today with a fake moustache and a bowler hat,” Will joked.

“Don’t be absurd. That would go against the whole principle of not drawing attention to myself.”

“Okay, tell me this, how many Hercule Poirot novels have you read?” Will challenged.

Lily pouted. “Nineteen.”

“And we were supposed to guess?”

She could have argued that her interest in the Poirot books was less owed to the characters than to
their novelist. Agatha Christie had left so significant a mark on Lily that she’d included the author in her notebook of influential women, a whole two pages were dedicated to Lily’s musings on Christie’s contributions as the best-selling and most widely-translated novelist of all time. Not only that, she also held a passion for archaeology, traveling the world in pursuit of her interests and had been a volunteer nurse during the Great War. When news of Agatha Christie’s death reached Lily a few months before, she’d actually cried at the breakfast table, blotting her cheeks with her robes so that no one would notice.

“I repeat,” Lily said, “We can’t just sit down and stare at him. He’ll know something is up.”

“Of course, we can! I do it all the time. Watch!” Will instructed.

Then, to Lily’s horror, he sat down at the table directly across from Will – no books, no parchment, nothing to mask his unabashed interest – and stared. Lily joined him at the table, unpacking her books and studying Remus for any sign that he felt the pair of eyes burning into his neck. Every time Remus let out a heavy breath, a stray blond curl would rise on the geyser of air only to collapse back down again upon his forehead.

“He’s not very observant when he’s tired,” Will said fondly.

“Just how often are you watching him, anyway?” Lily asked with an eyebrow raise that screamed judgment.

Will pretended to think. “If Mei-Lin’s to be believed, probably about as much as you watch Potter in Transfiguration.”

Lily froze, grew hot with embarrassment, considered, and then, “Touche.”

In the grand scheme of crushes that Will had entertained during his time at Hogwarts – a dubious honor and an expansive list of people – Remus Lupin ranked as one of his better choices. At least Remus Lupin had a sweet smile when someone managed to wring one from him, a feat few other than his closest friends ever achieved. He was also even-tempered and level-headed enough to keep Will in line, a responsibility that currently rested with Mei-Lin, who ran herself ragged trying to put a stop to Lily and Will’s worse impulses and would certainly appreciate the outsourcing. Then again, Remus had never done much to stop his mates from rampaging through the school, so Lily could be overestimating his commitment to reason.

“I don’t think Peter was lying about the hypothermia,” Will commented. “He really does look ill.”

“How can you tell?” Lily asked. To her, Remus always looked like might fall into a faint at any moment.

“See the way his hand is shaking as he writes? Also, look at his hair. He forgot to comb it this morning, and that never happens,” Will said, pointing without a hint of shame in Remus’s direction.

“There should be a book on treating hypothermia around here somewhere. I’m going to check,” Lily said, adding a quick warning about how Will should watch Remus carefully for any suspicious activity in the meantime.

Despite her dislike for the library, Lily was woefully familiar with its layout and tracked down a book that would answer all her questions within a matter of minutes. Questions like: would someone still be shaking hours after magical treatment for hypothermia? Lily flipped through the pages as she returned to her table, skimming the contents. The section on treatment claimed that the average person would be completely returned to health within an hour of the administered treatment, but an
addendum clarified that the elderly or ill could experience side effects for up to twelve hours.

Not for the first time, Lily paused to wonder about Remus’s constant absences to visit his sick mother and wonder whether he might be less than forthcoming with his explanations. Lily hoped not. She clearly remembered the rush of affiliation she’d felt in first year when she’d overheard whispers about how that Lupin boy’s mother was practically dying. Amidst a sea of juvenile concerns, Lily thought she’d found someone who would understand the frailty of human life, who would know the ache of a true and genuine pain.

Every time he returned home from a visit to his mum, Lily made it a point to give him a gift. Not having much, these usually consisted of a book or a spare piece of bubble gum, maybe answers to the homework he’d missed. She didn’t have any brilliant advice or insight into the experience of losing a mother despite having gone through the same process herself. Turned out, the universality of the experience was how much it hurt, and she couldn’t say a thing to alleviate that, but she’d felt a silent affinity with him all the same, a desire to ease some of that agony.

Contradictorily, Lily had also felt compelled to keep her distance ever since learning about his long-ill mother. Her mind would play tricks on her. Sometimes when she walked past him, she swore she smelled a haunting combination of lavender and sweat, just like her mother’s bedroom in those final months, when she’d soaked the covers through each night and Petunia would light lavender candles to mask the smell of decay that threatened to consume the entire house.

When Lily looked up from her book, she was surprised to find herself looking at an empty table. Not that she should have been surprised. In her absence, Will had taken his chance to join Remus and was talking animatedly in the other boy’s ear. Incognito was no longer an option, so Lily joined them.

“Ah, Lily,” Will greeted. “Remus here was just telling me about how he’s never been to Ireland, and I say he has to go first chance he gets. I swear it’s the freshest air in the world. Would do you a world of good.”

“Is there a lot of smog where you live? Where is it again…Wales, right?” Lily asked.

Remus nodded. “Cardiff. And yes, some. It blows over the channel from Paris sometimes.”

“I’m in the Midlands, so we’re far enough from London that we don’t get hit, but my town is also built around the paper milling industry, so I figure we’re all going to die of cancer anyway,” Lily said companionably, effectively ruining Will’s ploy to drive the conversation to romantic images of his hometown. He shot her a glare while Remus wasn’t looking.

“Air pollution: muggles’ gift to the wizarding world,” Remus joked.

“I’d happily breath straight Carbon if it meant some death eaters get poisoned right alongside me,” Lily said seriously, causing Remus to laugh, life slowly returning to his pallid face.

The conversation continued in the same vein for some time. Will would flirt, Lily would joke, and Remus would laugh. A happy trio. Their chat was pleasant, but Lily was hostage to her rigid schedule and a host of commitments loomed in the distance. She needed to get to business.

“I heard you were in the Hospital Wing today. Everything alright?” Lily asked.

“Thank you for asking. Madame Pomfrey fixed me right up,” Remus assured her gently.

“What kind of trouble did you and your mates get into this time?” Lily asked.
“The usual kind.”

“I had to invite Peter to partner with me in Potions today because you boys left him all alone,” Lily said. “I think he was a little bit down about being left out.”

Remus winced, rubbed a weary hand across his left eye. Others might have felt guilty for taking such an approach, but Lily didn’t. She was only being truthful as Peter was clearly hurt, and Lily didn’t make it a habit of feeling sorry when someone didn’t like their confrontation with the truth. Now, when she had cause to lie, those were the moments that pierced Lily’s heart, and she suspected she’d feel more than her fair share of shame before her investigation was over.

When Remus remained silent, Lily tried again, “I could have told you that swim this early in the spring was a bad idea. The water won’t be warm for another three months now at least.”

“I doubt it’ll be warm until the last day of school,” Will volunteered. “It’s bloody freezing out there.”

“Not our brightest moment. I’ll admit,” Remus laughed.

“Did you go with any girls?” Lily said, growing desperate as her subtle questions failed time and again to illicit any new information.

“Because if so, where was my invitation?” Will interrupted.

Remus blinked. “What? I…you just said it was too cold to consider going swimming…”

“On my own, yeah! But with you? Sounds like a grand time. Afterwards, shivering and wet, we could have shared body heat,” Will said shamelessly.

Lily kicked him. Here she was, trying to interrogate one of her prime suspects, and Will was coopting the conversation to flirt! To her horror, there was no returning to the subject either because Remus was looking at Will with big eyes that had entirely forgotten Lily was there.

“Did you go alone?” Lily tried one last time.

Remus didn’t even look at her.

Defeat. She’d tried to follow them, to suss out their secrets through conversation, and nothing was working. They were too on guard, too experienced in misbehavior to spill their secrets so easily. At the end of another day of obsessive work, Lily was left with nothing but suspicions.

The clock in the bell tower tolled, a taunting reminder of the time that was lost. Feeling at her wrist, Lily sought her own pulse. It throbbed against her fingertips, one beat per second, her own internal clock, ticking down, down, down.

She couldn’t afford another wasted day like this.

No. She needed a plan.

Chapter End Notes
Also, before I forget! Frightorflight asked me about influences, accurately guessing this had some Life or Death Brigade vibes, so I wanted to give a rundown of the three works that most inspired me with this story and to whom I owe the framework or enthusiasm for this tale.

The first is Gilmore Girls' life and death brigade. I've always thought there was something of a James/Lily parallel to Rory/Logan and was deeply struck by how magical those episodes are for Rory as an outsider.

Second is The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks, which I think should be required reading for all 14-year-old girls. I'd never read a book where the author so clearly loved its female protagonist and reveled in all the ways she was quirky and brilliant and entirely separate from her classmates. It's also about secret societies. I wanted to write something with a protagonist as delightful as Frankie - and I hope I've achieved that with Lily here.

Finally, The Little Friend by Donna Tartt. Less so in terms of content than in terms of priorities. It's a meandering book in that it frequently cuts away from the plot to give detailed background on the characters, and you leave the book astonished by how fully realized every character was. Lots of people found that polarizing and think those details would have been better left in her character notes & never shared, but for me, I thought it was revelatory and hope to achieve even half that familiarity with my characters.
“There is nothing naff about caring about...about the important things in life!” Lily told Will hotly.

“Oh come on, Lily, just about all your ideas of fun put me to sleep,” Will said.

“Learning about the world puts you to sleep?” Lily demanded.

“Yes!” Will snapped back. “Sometimes I just want to get pissed and have a good time. I’d say you should try it, but I think we both know you’re incapable.”

All day, Lily had ruminated on her desperate need for a plan. Lying out on the grass overlooking the Quidditch pitch, Lily and Will brainstormed, heads pressed close together and eyes weak from staring up at the sunlit sky. With questing fingers, Lily shred clover after clover along the fragile lines that bisected them.

The issue, they agreed, was that the Marauders were suspicious and isolationist by nature. Despite Lily’s impression of James and Sirius as loud and boastful, she had to admit after a few days of tracking them that they never really announced any of their secrets, and her intuition told her they had several. They were empathetic in a way Lily could never match, picking up on signals that something was wrong — like Lily stalking them through the castle that Wednesday — and maneuvering to avoid discovery. To wring their secrets from loose lips would necessitate bringing them to a state of complete relaxation, one in which Lily no longer looked like a threat. (Lily couldn’t help but smile when she thought of that, the idea that these four boys saw her as an equal, felt wary of her. It curled her toes.)

To gain their trust, Lily would need an excuse to spend time with them, an explanation as to why she’d suddenly become interested in parties and social politics after six years of finding alphabetizing potions ingredients more interesting than a drinking game with her peers. This was where Will would come in — Will with his uncanny eye for reading through his classmates and his aspirations toward achieving a level of classy debauchery that would make Oscar Wilde nod with approval. Strange as it was to Lily, people, Will explained, were terribly caught up in the opinions of others. They were so concerned that they spent a great deal of their days, their lives, considering how to dress and talk and act to influence those around them.

Of course, Lily was superficially aware that other people had a bizarre, nay unhealthy fixation with how they were perceived, but it was so foreign to her that she struggled to fully grasp the concept. She’d forget. Perhaps, she was so distant from the idea because she had accepted from a young age that others would have low opinions of her.

Growing up, she’d never been well-liked, inviting disdain from the children in her neighborhood: the girl who could make things happen, the girl with the mum who was wasting away locked up in her bedroom like Mrs. Rochester. They looked at Lily and they saw all their worst fears about ghosts and the unknown, and they reacted accordingly by keeping their distance, and if they were never cruel to her, they were certainly never kind either.

Before her mum’s death, it had been better. Sometimes Petunia would let Lily tag along with her friends, who couldn’t be intimidated by the impossible things Lily made happen — marbles that floated into place, long-missing toys that mysteriously turned up, leaves that feel and fell but never
touched the ground — because they were older and to be impressed or frightened by someone in a lower form would have broken every rule of childhood. But their mum had died and with her Petunia’s opportunity to have a life because there were meals to be put on the table and a house to be kept and a million other responsibilities that were enough to keep a ten-year-old dashing back-and-forth from dusk till dawn.

Within the school room, Lily could make friends, boys and girls who lived on the nicer side of town. The “nice” area of town consisted of two-blocks of houses that boasted central heating and, luxury of luxuries, two whole cars parked in every driveway. These children knew less of the strange circumstances that surrounded Lily and delighted in rolling their eyes at what they viewed as the common rabble’s fear of her. Still, there was nothing to replace a neighborhood friend, someone to retrieve you from your house in the summer, to share a strawberry ice when the sun grew too hot, to scrape you off the sidewalk when you topped from your bike on Retuers Hill — a stone monstrosity that plowed downward at a nearly seventy-degree angle before cutting sharply to the left at the bottom, a fence ahead to greet anyone who couldn’t turn their wheels swiftly enough. She’d never had that, and its absence had made her immune to the very social posturing that she now sought to emulate.

All of which was to explain how Lily and Will came to be squared off against each other in the common room first thing after dinner on Friday, when their audience would be at its largest. In a burst of feigned indignation, Lily had just sprung to her feet, hands planted firmly on her hips and feet wide in a stance of aggression, while she peered down at Will, who looked equally irritated. More than a few eyes had settled to watch them.

Everything hinged on this moment, this performance. Out of the corner of her eye, Lily could see Sirius and Remus watching her with muted interest, the chess board between them momentarily forgotten. She had her audience, her script, and her partner. Now, there was nothing left but to act her arse off. And she did.

“I can be loads of fun! I can drink and snog boys and dance and do anything else that you can. Watch me!”

She spat the words so venomously that tears came to her eyes with the force of it. Will looked startled as he spotted them and glanced blinkingly around, like he was trying to summon help. Lily grasped at that tendril of frustration, tried to follow it. Accused by her best mate of being a boring prude, the average witch might cry. Lily had plenty in her life to cry over, though she rarely indulged. Was it really such a chore to tap into that wounded part of her, the part that longed for her family’s approval, that missed her mum, that gasped and quaked in the night at the inevitability of her own death and the horrific prospect that it might come long before she had managed to achieve anything?

The tears spilled over.

A truly gifted actor in his own right, Will said, “Oh no, come on, Lily…I didn’t mean…you’re plenty fun!”

Stumbling, Lily backed away from Will and his pleading eyes. Her shin caught on a low end-table and the shudder of pain only caused the tears to fall more quickly. All eyes in the common room were set squarely on her, but she reduced her field of vision, focused on placing one purposefully unsteady foot in front of another, chin tucked into her chest like a wounded animal protects its vulnerable throat. She didn’t pause until she was safely ensconced in the narrow staircase that led to the girls’ dormitories. There, she ran her flat palms against wet cheeks, dashing away the tears that she had willed into existence but now couldn’t seem to stop. As her breath hitched, grew uneven,
Lily feared she might actually drop to her knees and begin to sob.

Lily nearly leapt out of her skin when someone placed a hand on her shoulder. Twisting about, Lily saw Emmeline, face contorted with concern and hand now hovering just above Lily’s arm, like she wasn’t sure whether it was appropriate to comfort her.

“Are you alright?” Emmeline asked her gently.

Lily shuddered minutely. “I feel cold.”

“I can make you some tea,” Emmeline offered.

“You shouldn’t trouble yourself,” Lily said on instinct, but she didn’t patently refuse either. Tea did sound lovely.

Emmeline didn’t make a move to leave and neither did Lily. Both of them silently regarded the other.

“You shouldn’t take what Will said seriously…or well, what I said the other night…You’re not… You’re different than just about anyone I’ve ever met, but that’s not a bad thing,” Emmeline said. Lily remembered what Emmeline had said, about how Lily tried to be different for the sake of it, and wondered whether Emmeline felt guilty now, like Lily’s reaction to Will might have been triggered by an amalgamation of little slights, accumulating over the course of weeks.

Neither of them knew what to say. Once upon a time, the words had always flown easily between them. There was a time when they had never struggled to find the words. At dinner or volleying a tennis ball or walking to one of their many shared classes, Lily and Emmeline had built a friendship, something that would only grow and thrive as they matured. Or so Lily had thought. Come the start of the year, Emmeline quit the tennis club, no longer walked with Lily to classes, or chatted with her over dinner. No explanation was given. It was one of those unexplained phenomena, where a student returned irrevocably changed over the summer. The conversation that had once flowed as easily as an overturned pitcher of milk had thickened to the viscosity of honey, slowed to nearly nothing.

So now they’d become strangers to one another. No, worse. Before, they had been separated by mere unfamiliarity. Now, there was a chasm of bitterness that lingered there, the source of which was unknown to Lily, but she felt it viscerally. It wasn’t one-sided.

The warmth of Emmeline’s concern made the coldness diminish somewhat.

There were still no words to reach out and cover the distance, yet Lily couldn’t help but feel the bridge had shortened, and if she couldn’t make it across on foot, perhaps she could swim.

A stampede of footsteps interrupted them as the rest of their dormmates raced to see the cause of the commotion. Mei-Lin’s face was contorted with worry, and Lily realized with a bolt of horror that she had forgotten to clue Mei-Lin in on the plan. At her side, Marlene buzzed with sympathy and the queer excitement of a person who lived for drama even as they felt for the people in its throws. A step behind them both, Mary was mostly neutral, but even she watched Lily carefully as if in fear of another outburst.

Lily leapt to reassure everyone that she was fine, but she couldn’t blame them for not believing her. Her cheeks were still flushed and warm. Lily found herself corralled upstairs amidst a cacophony of upbeat voices. Somehow, it was decided that what Lily needed was a makeover, something to make her feel fresh and new. Lily’s protests were summarily quashed. After all, she’d just announced to the world her intention to have wild, unconstrained fun. Looking the part was step one.

Spilled messily across Emmeline’s bed, Marlene’s makeup lay in an array of color. Lily sat on
Mary’s bed with her back supported by a mountain of cushions, which Mei-Lin had hastily prepared. The other girls all turned her chin in one direction and then another, discussing color palettes and combination skin.

The prodding brought back overwhelming memories of when a six-year-old Petunia had filched their mother’s makeup and decided Lily would make a superb doll. All of Petunia’s friends had participated in transforming Lily’s baby-sweet face into that of a garish clown. The photo her mum had later taken sat proudly on the kitchen counter beside a picture of Petunia dancing naked beneath the hose in the postage-stamp that was their yard. From her first makeover experience, Lily had learned there was an intimacy to allowing someone to transform you, to accept their fingers poking at vulnerable flesh and remain still against your instincts. Lily hadn’t appreciated Petunia’s mates’ involvement, only staying still to make her big sister happy, but when it was Petunia’s turn, Lily’s limbs would grow heavy and she’d still, Petunia’s touch more comforting than a lullaby.

Only centimeters from Lily’s face, Mary had never been closer. Lily could count the fine hairs on Mary’s nose, see the subtle start of a moustache that Mary would later attack. The room was filled with a kind of magic that the professors didn’t teach: the magic of girls. Lily felt she could quickly grow drunk on it.

For a brief respite, Mary pulled back from lining Lily’s lips, so Lily took the opportunity to ask, “So if I wanted to have a good time, the Grindylows party would be the place to do it, right?”

“Absolutely,” Mary murmured, her eyes locked disconcertingly on Lily’s lips as she studied her work. “Every good-looking boy in the school, more drink than you could ever swallow, and no rules.”

A recipe for disaster essentially.

“I guess, I just feel...I’m not used to going into situations unprepared, and I’m nervous. Maybe if I knew more about the...I don’t know, history of the Grindylows, I’d feel more comfortable,” Lily said with the hesitance of a confession being aired. Drawing answers from her dormmates had been a chore in the past, but Lily had struck upon the right balance between pity and curiosity, and the other girls were quick to reply.

“Well, I can only tell you what anyone could piece together. For example...if you look back through the history of the parties, people speculate that there were no female members until, like, the mid-1700s or something because they’d throw these parties and invite like, half the female population and only a handful of blokes to compete,” Emmeline said.

“You’d think it would have been easy to spot out the members with them making it so obvious,” Mary commented.

“Absolutely! But it’s changed since, for sure. You’ll see tomorrow night, Lily. There’s practically a perfect gender split now. Plenty of fit boys for you to eye up,” Emmeline said.

Newly nervous, Lily asked, “And what about muggleborns?”

“I mean, I’d bet money that they used to be berks about it. I mean, they were founded in what? 1583? Were there any non-bigoted wizards back then?”

Lily bit her tongue to prevent herself from stating the obvious: Yes. There were muggleborn witches and wizards back then. They counted every bit as much as their prejudiced pureblood peers.

The flames of Lily’s perhaps unwarranted dislike of the Grindylows stoked to new heights. The
society that had run without supervision for hundreds of years in her school – her beloved school of magic and dreams boasted a foundation of misogyny and pureblood supremacy. She wrinkled her nose, upsetting Mary’s application. Lipstick smeared across her teeth. Sheepishly, Lily presented her front teeth to Mary’s blotting and promised to stay still from then on because Mary looked positively grumpy about the interruption.

Still, Mary took a moment to say sympathetically, “Don’t worry about it, Lily. My family’s all muggle, and they’ve been inviting me since I was a third-year. I guess you could get a bad year where all the members are awful or something, but it’s not what the society is about anymore.”

Mei-Lin abandoned the safety of her own familiar bed to sit beside Lily and stroke her hair. If they were alone, Lily probably would have tackled her with gratitude. Sometimes, the reality of muggleborn prejudice hit her like an unexpected tether ball to the gut. She could go weeks without facing the grim reality, only to be forced to confront the irrational hatred all over again, and it was just like Mei-Lin to predict Lily’s impending pain and intercede.

“Oh! Also, I think there’s a rule that the members have to come from all four houses,” Marlene added eagerly.

“Why do you think that?” Emmeline asked.

“Well, I mean, look at their parties! It’s just like the whole boy-girl thing. There’s always a good mix of the houses, and you have to figure that a Slytherin-run group would never invite so many Gryffindors and vice versa, and remember last year? When, like everyone in Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff started fighting over the cup? There was still an even mix at the next Grindylows party, even though everyone claimed to hate each other,” Marlene explained.

Everyone paused for a beat, less so because they needed to internalize the theory than because it had come from Marlene. Despite her likeable personality, Marlene was not known for her intellect. To put it plainly, Lily outperformed Marlene in all their classes, including DADA and Transfiguration.

Just because the message came from an unlikely source, however, didn’t mean it was wrong, and Marlene’s logic checked out. To Lily, it was a coup. The question to answer now was whether it was written in the charter that members of each house be represented or if prior members from each house only selected from their own, and if so, by some rule or preference. Lily struggled valiantly not to shake with her enthusiasm because it would only irritate Mary further.

The politics of who received an invitation, Lily decided, was her greatest lead outside her suspicions regarding the Marauders. She’d need to map all the conflicts around the school – who despised who, who fancied who, etc. – and from there, she could draw conclusions about conspicuous absences or first-time invitees like herself. She might never have pieced together that James was a member if she herself hadn’t received an invitation out of the blue.

“Are you feeling better, Lily?” Emmeline questioned gently.

True to her word, she’d prepared a cup of tea, which she held, patiently waiting for Mary to finish so that Lily could drink comfortably. The subtly sweet fruitiness of jasmine wafted from the steaming cup along with that euphoric hint, the one so common in white flowers, reminiscent of a lily. The aroma was a balm, and even though she had largely faked her distress, Lily found that she was truly comforted.

“Loads better,” Lily said honestly.

“Good!” Marlene said. “And just to make sure you stay that way, I want to give you something.”
She rooted through her trunk, flinging unwanted skirts and magazines to the floor in her heated search. Finding her prize buried at the bottom, Marlene emerged triumphant. In her hands was a cuckoo clock. It was a milky brown – tempting all to take a bite and chance coming away with savory chocolate on the tongue instead of wood – ornamented with wooden leaves and three cuckoo birds. The clock piece itself was small amidst all the decoration and the door from which the mechanical bird would emerge was even smaller.

“It’s made from wood from the Black Forest. My mum got it for me when she was in Germany last summer, but I never use it. Since it’s battery-run, it can still run, though it malfunctions sometimes,” Marlene said.

“And you want to give this to me?” Lily asked uncertainly.

Lily counted it among the stranger gifts she’d ever received, although the intent behind the gifting was devastatingly kind. Lily accepted the clock and listened as Marlene explained the mechanics of how to rewind the time to the right hour. Lily would hang it above her bed, a daily reminder of the unexpected generosity of her roommates.

“You do know the significance of the cuckoo, don’t you?” Mary asked, her breath ghosting along Lily’s forehead as she leaned over to powder Lily down with a fluffy puff.

“No.”

Mary didn’t move to explain, and the silence stretched long and meaningful.

Finally, Emmeline said, “It’s the harbinger of spring.”

Lily noticed the cuckoo once more. Around each of the eyes, the manufacturer had painted a small ring to make them stand out. They were blood red.

The way women carefully prepped their faces, applying their cosmetics in the same order, in the same manner day after day, had all the significance of a ritual. It was a transformation, the painting of a mask upon skin, and like all masks, its purpose was to convey identity even as everything that lay beneath her skin, at the root of her – the nerves and sinus cavity and the arteries of her nose – remained fundamentally unchanged. It was no different than a transfiguration. Considering its power, was it any wonder that parliament had passed legislation in 1770, warning women that the use of cosmetics to ensnare a husband may be grounds for annulment and a trial for witchcraft?

Lily had never been more beautiful, and there was something sickening to it. Yet, when Mei-Lin urged her to wash her face after their dormmates had vacated the room, leaving Lily and Mei-Lin alone, Lily had refused. She had told Mei-Lin that she didn’t want to risk alienating the other girls after they had only just begun to share intel on the Grindylows. But there was more to it. She was wearing a mask now, and maybe she was frightened of what she would find underneath when the moment came to remove it.

This excuse came after Lily had explained her theatrics with Will in full. To her credit, Mei-Lin hadn’t chastised Lily for her forgetfulness, only rolled into a conversation about the implications of Lily’s new strategy and how the Marauders might react. If the Gryffindor girls were anything to go by, they’d split open like a hickory nut.

“Do you think you can manage it by yourself?” Lily asked, having just requested that Mei-Lin take the lead in mapping out the conflicts of their classmates. People tended to overlook Mei-Lin, because
she was small and quiet, which meant they’d talk of subjects they’d never broach with someone like Lily present.

“I’ll need some time, but I think I can handle it if Will helps with some of the subtleties,” Mei-Lin said agreeably. “I’m glad you asked, actually. I was starting to think everyone was going to have a job but me.”

“If you’re looking for work, all you have to do is ask. I’ll keep you busy, just drown you with my homework,” Lily said, chortling at her own joke.

The movement of her own reflection in the full-length mirror beside Mary’s bed caught Lily’s attention, a momentary shiver of fright as she saw something move and couldn’t tell if it was her. Under the influence of the new identity she wore, an idea had crept into her mind, one that she hadn’t succeeded in banishing throughout her conversation with Mei-Lin. An idea so appealing, she nearly shook with it.

“Mei-Lin...what do you think about me asking James to take me to the party tomorrow?” Lily asked quietly.

A smile slowly curved Mei-Lin’s mouth. “Lily Evans, are you telling me that you’re finally giving Potter a chance?”

“No! I mean, he’s probably a member,” Lily stuttered. “And my whole goal is to find clues there, so going with him would give me a perfect excuse for, you know, being around him the whole time.”

Mei-Lin’s smile was knowing. She didn’t believe Lily for a second, which was fair as Lily only partially believed herself. Her motives were not altruistic, her dedication to the story only the cherry on top of her plan.

And yet, there remained the inviolable truth that Lily didn’t like dating. She’d tried and grown bored within a matter of weeks. Someday, Lily thought she would make an excellent paramour for a man abroad, someone in Italy or Pakistan perhaps, who would look forward to the couple weeks a year when her travels brought her to his home city, a few weeks where they would eat lavishly, explore, and lose themselves to the romance before she would jet away to follow the call of her career. Her only promise to return someday.

Dating at Hogwarts was something else entirely. The ugly truth was that it required time, the scarcest resource on the planet and the one Lily hoarded the most covetously. Maintaining a boyfriend meant long dates on the weekend when her hours could be better spent on potions research, meals with a boy that could be better spent with her friends discussing journalism, hours before the fire that could have been dedicated to drawing inspiration from the women of history or her oft-abandoned homework. As much as she longed for it, she had no business dating James, and she knew it.

More firmly, Lily said, “Really, Mei-Lin, I’m not trying to start anything with James. I’ll flirt, we’ll both have fun, and I’ll learn about the Grindylows. A win for everyone involved, but nothing more. He’s the key to all of this. I just know it.”

“I don’t know why you do this to yourself, Lily. There’s nothing wrong with dating,” Mei-Lin said.

“So, you don’t think I should ask him?”

Mei-Lin sighed, considered. She opened her mouth to speak several times before closing it, like she was grappling with the right words. “I think that someone’s going to get hurt. You say it’s a win for everyone, but I’m not sure it’s a win for either of you.”
Every counterpoint deserved genuine consideration, so Lily afforded Mei-Lin’s viewpoint a minute of reflection. She could concede that there was a very real chance that she would be devastated when the time came to walk away. Discovering that she and James fit as well as she suspected would only make her longing for him worse. On the hand, other students managed to have casual relationships all the time. They’d go to parties with a date and end the night with an invitation to Hogsmeade from another student. They’d snog with no intention of ever discussing it in the morning. They managed all of this without collapsing underneath a mountain of emotional baggage.

It all came down to the framing. So long as she didn’t mislead James into thinking she was propositioning him for a serious relationship, they could both attend the party with their expectations in check, not lose themselves to the fantasy of something more. And maybe she’d kiss him and learn the texture of his lips. So what? She’d always liked learning new things!

Mei-Lin could look unhappy all she liked. Her disapproval would not dictate Lily’s actions. No one’s would.

Fearing the boldness her makeup had inspired might be fleeting, Lily hurried downstairs. Fate wanted Lily’s plan to work because she found James downstairs in the common room, freshly showered from Quidditch practice and more beautiful than any boy had a right to be. There were only a half-dozen students in the common room, and James was sitting alone except for Sirius, a smaller audience than Lily had anticipated and yet another blessing.

They were sitting in the center of the room, leaving Lily to debate whether she should sit down in front of James or remain standing. Either option left her in an awkward position. Ultimately, she decided to stay on her feet, hands fidgeting at her sides and her shadow, by the light of the fire, cast long overtop of them.


At James’ lack of reaction, Lily concluded he mustn’t have heard about her earlier outburst. It wasn’t like his friends reported to him on her every move or something. Why would they? She’d have to be completely self-involved to think James cared so much about her comings-and-goings. No matter.

“James, I was hoping to ask you something,” Lily said, jumping right in. She raised her eyebrows at Sirius in what she hoped was a clear request that he vacate his seat, preferably the room altogether. He didn’t move.

“Sure. What can I help you with?” James asked with a cheeky grin.

Sirius’s continued presence threw her for a moment. There would be no convincing him to move, however, so she reminded herself that she was in the middle of an investigation, that cowardice had no place in journalism, and grabbed tight the inner fount of brazenness that had served her well her whole life.

“Well, you know the party tomorrow?” she said.

“I do.”

“I was thinking about how my closest friends won’t be there, and how it would be so much better if I was there with people, someone, who I know I really like. Parties are always better with good company,” Lily said.

“Agreed,” James nodded.

“And I don’t want to go to the party and just stand against the wall the whole night. I want to have
fun, like real fun, which means I ought to go with someone who’s the definition of fun,” Lily elaborated.

This time, when she paused, James didn’t fill the silence for her. He merely looked at her.

“Thinking about it, I realized it made the most sense if you and I went together.” Realizing ‘going together might be too vague’, Lily hastily added, “I mean if you take me to the party.”

Lily longed for the ability to read the subtleties of the human face because James did something with his just then that she couldn’t begin to decipher. Long confident that James liked her, Lily wanted to interpret his flat expression as a cover for his internal excitement. She, after all, had assumed he would be ecstatic for the chance to finally take her out after she had long kept him at arm’s length.

By the time she had finished her bold request, Lily had given way to nerves. It would be impossible to separate her investigation from dating James Potter. Mei-Lin was right. She liked him. Her stomach wouldn’t be boiling with butterflies if she didn’t. She wanted to discover what it would be like to be with him, and she could have it all: uncover secrets of the Grindylows and give him a true shot. Given that he was the first boy she’d ever truly liked in her short life, of course she was nervous.

James smiled then, and at least it was a familiar expression (smile equals happy, Lily could sort that), even if she didn’t know what he was thinking. Once he began to speak, she discovered the contents of his thoughts and everything came crashing down.

“I’m flattered, Lily, really, but you’ll need to find someone else to teach you how to be fun,” James said. His voice was loud enough that it spread to everyone in the common room.

“So you don’t want to go together?” Lily clarified because she was suddenly unsure of everything.

“I’ve already got a hot date,” James shrugged, seemingly unconcerned with the fact that he was publicly rejecting her after months of flirting and years of fighting.

Lily clasped her hands together in a bid to stop them from fidgeting violently. “Well…I… I wouldn’t want to ask you to break a date. Maybe we can do something together next week?”

“Sorry. I’m going to be busy next week, and the weeks after,” James said, and he didn’t sound remotely apologetic.

Forced to reconcile with the truth, Lily closed her eyes. He wasn’t rejecting her because he had a date and to break it would be impolite. He was rejecting her because he had no interest in dating her. All of the flirting in classes was merely a diversion to him, not indicative of any real interest. Perhaps, he’d never had any, or if he had, it had died sometime that year, and Lily had been too blind to see it. If she asked around, she’d probably learn he talked to every girl in their year in the same way, like they too were part of something special. And by default, that made all of them — Lily included — the exact opposite.

“If you really want some company, I’d be happy to take you, Evans. Just let me know,” Sirius chimed in, and he pursed his lips and blew her a kiss.

What had seemed like silly banter only days before when she thought James fancied her and Sirius supported them now twisted into something sleazy. She’d misjudged everything, and Sirius had been mocking her this entire time.

She was shaking. Her body wasn’t a large enough container to hold back the competing feelings of shame and rage that swirled within her. She wanted to hex James into the ground. She wanted to
crawl into bed and never wake up. She wanted to rewind time and never become a girl foolish enough to fancy James Potter.

Still, she had to try one last time, just to understand, because her world had been abruptly rewritten and she needed to make sense of it.

In a small voice, Lily said, “I thought you liked me.”

Her words spurred something in James because he bent forward for the first time, no longer leaning cockily against his seat, to look her straight in the eyes. She wanted to snap at him that whatever he hoped to communicate to her, he best put into words because she couldn’t read whatever message he was trying to telegraph. Fortunately, he did, and the message transformed her rage into something visceral, something that slid hot and acidic through her stomach and eroded all in its wake.

“I do like you, Lily. If you ask me, you and me are end game. We’re going to be that couple that, at our wedding, everyone talks about how they always knew we’d end up together. We’re inevitable. You just need to be patient,” James said.

He smirked.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Lily practically exploded. Sirius started to snicker.

Lily thought she knew exactly what he meant despite her question. James would be newly seventeen at midnight with another beautiful girl who would want to shag him at the party and there would be another after that and so on. Seventeen and the most popular boy in school, he could date and shag whoever he wanted, all with some demented guarantee in his head that Lily would be there waiting for him when he was finished and ready to settle for one girl. He was incredibly lucky she didn’t tackle him.

“I’m sure you’ll have plenty of fun at the party without me,” James said in a cheap attempt at consolation. Sirius hadn’t stopped laughing.

She didn’t tackle either of them. She did, however, grab a half-finished glass of pumpkin juice from the table and toss it directly into James’ face, a few droplets catching Sirius as well, which he patently deserved. James sputtered and blinked as he tried to recover from the unexpected attack.

Lily wasn’t finished. “You…you! End game? End game? You’re out of your bloody mind, James Potter. If you want to shag other girls, that’s fine, but don’t tell me that you expect me to be sitting there waiting for you when it’s all over! You’re a pig!”

Laughing uproariously, Sirius actually fell off the couch. Even James had begun to chuckle, like her outburst — born of serious pain — was an adorable display. The entire thing smacked of patronization and fed into the anger within her.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Lily practically exploded. Sirius started to snicker.

Lily thought she knew exactly what he meant despite her question. James would be newly seventeen at midnight with another beautiful girl who would want to shag him at the party and there would be another after that and so on. Seventeen and the most popular boy in school, he could date and shag whoever he wanted, all with some demented guarantee in his head that Lily would be there waiting for him when he was finished and ready to settle for one girl. He was incredibly lucky she didn’t tackle him.

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“Come on, Lily, that’s not what I —”

Whatever James wanted to say, Lily refused to listen. He’d lost the right to speak when he laughed at her.

Jabbing her finger in his direction, Lily shouted, “Understand one thing right now. You and I are never, ever going to happen!”

With that, Lily spun away and raced for the stairs. She didn’t look back to see if James magicked away the pumpkin juice or how he’d taken her declaration — probably perfectly well considering the tone of their encounter. All she could do was take the stairs two at a time in a desperate bid to escape
her humiliation and this miserable day. Everyone had seen her rejection, and for once in her life, she felt the swell of true embarrassment.

She burst into the girls’ shared bathroom, making directly for the mirrors. There, her false reflection greeted her, still pretty but now utterly distraught. Furious, she ran the water and clawed at her face, like she could rip the makeup off as easily as she could remove her blouse. Her hands were frantic and shaking, water spraying in every direction. Faces were nothing but masks just like she’d always known, and the one she’d seen today, poised and confident, was an ugly lie.

Only when her face had transformed into a new mask — this one grotesque with streaks of black from eye to chin and lipstick smeared like a slit throat — did she stop. There. If this was a mask, at least it reflected how she truly felt, didn’t fool her into believing the world would reshape itself only because she looked different.

She had really, truly liked him.

That her judgment could be so lacking was what hurt worst of all. She’d always relied on her instincts, her discipline to survive in the world, and, in one cruel half hour, James had stripped her of that, leaving her as vulnerable and alone as she’d been in the weeks following her mum’s cancer diagnosis.

She would never forgive him.

Chapter End Notes

Shout out to TrueHomiePiP, who’s left me worried reviews about when James would inevitably fuck it up, and well…sorry it came so soon.

If you have any ‘wtf was the cuckoo bit’ questions. You can ask or look up the symbolism of the cuckoo bird. Harbinger of spring is only one meaning & not the one Mary was thinking of.
The Party

Chapter Notes

Updating a week early (woo!) because the end of that chapter was um…mean.

An enormous thank you to corinaj, who offered to beta and look over for typos and in the process informed me that muggle/mudblood/muggleborn should all be capitalized, just about giving me a heart attack after years of being in this fandom. (My poor heart couldn’t take it, so that’s not going to change, but what a great thing to learn.)

I hope everyone enjoys & thank you all for being understanding about the less than stellar update schedule. My sincere hope is that I’ll start writing at the pace I used to (wrote 8,000 words in the past few days, so that’s pretty damn good progress!) because if so, we may be able to get faster updates someday. But who knows honestly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Can you even believe it? The gall! Clearly dear old mum left out a few lessons on common courtesy!”

The other members of the paper tittered mildly.

“Honestly!” Mei-Lin’s fist banged down on the table, rattling an ink well. It clanged like a tinny bell before settling, the ink’s sloshing slowing to a gentle back and forth. “My Ricochet never misses the litter box. Ever. Meanwhile, her demon of a cat runs wild, and she has the nerve to suggest that I be the one to clean it up!”

Like always, Mei-Lin was in an uproar over Mary’s less-than-housetrained cat. That morning, when the girls had discovered the piss-soaked carpet, Mary had coolly informed Mei-Lin that she should see to cleaning up Ricochet’s mess and whisked away without a backward glance.

“And Marlene agreed, of course, because she’s completely brainless,” Mei-Lin continued. “At least Emmeline had the decency to look embarrassed by the whole thing, but if she was really sorry, she would have demanded Mary come back and clean it up rather than leaving me to it!”

“It’s a wave of a wand and gone. Why do you care so much?” Will inquired with the laziest of interest.

“It’s the principle of the matter!”

They were all gathered in the library, making far too much noise and likely to draw Madame Pince upon themselves at any moment. Despite the mid-day hour, the light through the windows was dim. Storm clouds had gathered during the night and a non-stop onslaught of rain had accompanied them. Raindrops pelted the side of the castle with enough vigor that the stone failed to entirely suppress the sound, a gentle repetition that had lulled half a dozen students to sleep, slumped over and dozing with open-mouths over their books.

“I’m not surprised by anyone anymore,” Lily said sourly. “I mean, just look at the way Potter swans around the school without a care in the world.”
In the spring of 1966, Lily had been in year one of Primary. The school’s colors were the pale yellow of a buttercup, present in her pleated school skirt and the tie ever at her neck, and grey. On the first day of school, she’d worn her school-approved grey cardigan and a white blouse that her mum had sewn from a store-bought pattern that summer, the only article of clothing on her body that wasn’t a hand-me-down from Petunia. Generously freckled and carefully pressed, she looked clean and sparkling, like a newly cast cherub.

Within weeks, she’d muddied her neat white socks to the point that her mum binned them and she went sockless for a month. She’d torn the sleeves of her cardigan, and the skirt had begun to fray. Her outfit’s turn towards dissolution better represented her soul at six than any pristine uniform ever could. It was in that disintegrating costume that Jimmy Barrons had knocked Lily to the ground in a game of tag and called her a blotty ginger. Giving new meaning to the moniker ‘ankle biter,’ Lily had attacked, chomping down on his ankles until he was felled alongside her. Then, she’d sprung to her feet and kicked his kneecaps until his chubby face transformed with tears. Only then, sympathy for his plight overcoming her, did she stop. No matter how justified, she never could stand to see someone in pain.

If James Potter had been before her now, she would have kept kicking and kicking.

Mei-Lin sighed. “Lily, we all agree that Potter is a terrible git. What else is there to say?”

Less than subtle, Lily had earned the chastisement from the way she’d carried on about James since his villainous rejection of her the evening before. For most of the day, Lily had paced back and forth like a possessed soldier at march, ranting about how she might unmask the Grindylows, decimate them once and for all. The society made a wonderful proxy for her real target: James.

“I’m just saying, I see some parallels between him and Mary with the lack of courtesy and all,” Lily said, refusing to leave off the James subject for a few minutes even at Mei-Lin’s suggestion. “He won’t be so arrogant when I get finished with my story, though. Oh no, just you wait and see. When I publish my tell-all, I’m going to list him as my source so all his society-mates rise up and stone him.”

“Protect your sources,” Dorcas interjected swiftly.

“Ah, but see that’s the beauty of it. I won’t be exposing my sources because he won’t really be a source, but no one will realize,” Lily said, cackling like a stereotypical cartoon witch.

“I don’t know about the party tonight. You’re not exactly...objective, right now,” Dorcas said, eyes tracking Lily warily.

She couldn’t lie to Dorcas. She wasn’t objective. Her passion for uncovering the secrets of the Grindylows had already been a tangible force, but she’d crossed into new territory. A vendetta, she discovered, could be every bit as motivating as ambition.

“I may be a little...distracted,” Lily admitted, “but I can still keep a clear head tonight. I’ll keep a hundred meters between me and the Supreme Wanker –” her newest nickname for James. “–and I’ll interrogate some of the other partygoers. They’re not a society of one, so the other members should be present.”

Lily’s call for confidence might have carried more weight if she wasn’t systematically tearing a sheet of parchment into shreds as she spoke. The pieces trickled to the floor to join the heap that had already collected there from her past victims. All of her friends watched her hands work in abject terror.
“I just don’t know if this story is healthy for you anymore, Lily, and it will reflect poorly on the paper if you end up in the Hospital Wing from a breakdown,” Dorcas said.

“I’m not sure anyone could tell the difference if Lily went barmy. I imagine it would look so very much like her day-to-day face,” Will offered.

“It doesn’t matter because no one is having a breakdown,” Lily announced. Except for James.

She hadn’t slept a wink the night before, terrorized by her memory of the terrible event. Her brain had chosen to immortalize it, capturing every detail of the scene from the sweat of her palms to the dusky scent of James’ cologne.

When Lily’s mind wasn’t tormenting her with images of her humiliation, she’d lain awake, wondering at the intensity of her own feelings. She revisited every enemy she’d ever made, every moment of hurt to compare. As it turned out, no one had ever embarrassed her like James.

Previously, the most embarrassing encounter of her life had been at one of Slughorn’s little gatherings, the kind where he invited alumni from the school to showcase his influence and forge a few bountiful connections. Slughorn had lured her there with promises that Blenheim Stock would be in attendance, the same Blenheim Stock who had authored several books on muggles interacting with and noticing magic, seminal works that blended his wry anecdotal voice with carefully researched observations on the consequences of these meetings of muggle and magic.

Lily, enchanted by Stock’s work, had talked passionately on the subject for nearly half an hour to a quiet wizard at the party. Fifteen and starting to obsess over men as was natural, Lily had questioned aloud whether Stock might like gingers and want to bring one along on his next expedition. Only then did the wizard gently inform Lily that his wife would not appreciate if he started up a dalliance with a teenage girl but that he was flattered she found his work so impactful. As it turned out, Blenheim Stock never submitted a photo for his book covers because he was deeply sensitive about the circles that drooped like empty sacks beneath his eyes. Lily nearly died on the spot.

But even that horror story didn’t compare to James’ rejection.

As to the anger, the only person who had ever elicited such fury within Lily before was Severus. James would have been horrified to be grouped in such company. In some ways, however, Lily felt what James had done might qualify as worse. At least she’d been able to punish Severus for his transgressions by walking away from him, taken comfort in the fact that her wrath wounded him in the same way he’d hurt her. With James, there was nothing she could do.

“Are you sure you understood him right?” Will asked for the hundredth time that day. “It just doesn’t sound like James at all.”

“I never understood him enough, evidently,” Lily replied coolly. She had little patience for anyone looking to excuse James just then.

“I’m serious, Lily. He’s mad about you, and I can’t think of a more perfect couple.”

“Absolutely. We’re as well paired as Princess Margaret and the Earl of Snowden,” Lily said.

News of the royal couple’s separation had only reached them last week and had set the entire muggleborn population abuzz. Will was fond enough of the royals, in theory, to follow the sarcastic reference.

The way Lily saw it, James’ pithy overturns of still fancying her were less than useless. James possessed the mindset of a boy untouched by loss. He assumed that he could delay the pursuit of the
things he wanted endlessly because time was on his side, because the world and all its inhabitants froze when James Potter wasn’t looking, so that when he finally turned his attention back to her, she would be standing there, unchanged and ready. Lily knew that time was on no one’s side. In fact, it was the enemy.

“I think it would be best to table your investigation until you cool off a bit. Wait a few days until the burn’s faded, and then start again with a clear mindset,” Dorcas suggested.

“And waste possibly the only invitation to a Grindylows party I’ll ever get? Not likely!” Lily said. “Besides, it’s not like you can force me.”

“I’m the editor of this bloody paper! You’d be surprised what I can do,” Dorcas grumbled.

One look at Lily was enough to make it clear, however, that she would not be stopped, short of trapping her in a cupboard for the night. The tale of Lily’s hard work and determination was writ large all over her body. Just from her escapades in brewing that morning, she’d broken half the fingernails on her left hand, her knees were scratched red from when she’d tripped, and a rash had snaked around her wrist after an accidental brush with the foxglove stores. She could handle Dorcas’s ire.

“You know, I’m starting to think Remus is hiding something, too. Might be Grindylow-related, so I’ll have to carve out some time to follow him,” Lily said, changing the subject (or as much as she could as her brain refused to process any thought not related to James or his mates).

“Lay off Remus! He doesn’t deserve you turning his life upside down just because you’re angry with Potter,” Will ordered.

“You’re blinded by love, you traitor!” Lily pointed an accusing finger at him. The Marauders were members of the organization she’d declared anathema, friends with the Supreme Wanker, and all around complicit as Sirius had displayed last night when he mocked her pain. They were all fair game.

“I’m not in love with Remus!” Will protested. “I only have a healthy appreciation for his form, which in no way keeps me from being objective, unlike you. He’s a decent bloke, Lily, and I’m not going to think differently just because Potter reminded you that he’s been a berk since day one.”

“No consorting with the enemy,” Lily growled, but it was her turn to be overruled. If ambition and curiosity drove her, Will was motivated by love, and he could be every bit as stubborn.

With a face so straight it could have substituted for a ruler, Mei-Lin said, “Will will do as Will’s wills him to do.”

Lily’s lips trembled. Dorcas groaned at the absurdity. Will tittered with appreciation. And all the while, Mei-Lin’s expression remained stone-cold impassive. Cliché as it was, Lily felt like a weight had lifted. She laughed.

Because maybe talk of traitors and targets was all a bit melodramatic, when she examined the situation objectively. When they wrote the story of her life, James Potter would hardly warrant a footnote, at most a short mention within a chapter dedicated to Lily’s school years. Far more pages would be dedicated to this: Lily, surrounded by her closest friends, laughing about nothing.

“Alright, from this moment forward, I’m putting a moratorium on all mentions of Potter. His name and all colorful nicknames that speak to his character will not pass my lips for the rest of the day. No more James Potter talk for me,” Lily announced.
The universe had a strange sense of humor. It was something her mum had always said, usually, when they were running late to a dentist appointment and managed to hit every red light – and there weren’t many in their little town – or when a tire went out right before a car trip. It was a way of declaring that fate laughed boldly in the face of pitiful, human expectations. And her mum had been one hundred percent right.

“Heard my name,” James Potter declared, climbing over the back of the empty chair beside Lily so that he could settle down atop it.

A strange sense of humor, indeed.

Panic gripped her. On more than one occasion, she had been called shameless for the way she doggedly pursued her interests with nary a concern to spare, but never had she touched upon James’ degree of brazenness. Casual as you please, he proffered an open sack and said, “Pistachio?”

Without looking at him directly, Lily shook her head. Shrugging, James cracked one in half. He swept his tongue along the salty outer shell, and then popped the nut into his mouth. It crunched solidly as it met his teeth. Mortifyingly, Lily’s stomach chose that exact moment to rumble.

“Actually, yeah, I’ll take some,” Will said.

Will rifled through the tan sack and emerged with a fistful of pistachios, nearly all of James’ supply. The loss of his snack shook some of James’ bravado, and he wrinkled his nose at what remained. Lily smiled at Will approvingly.

“Where do you get all this food, anyway?” Dorcas asked. “I swear, every time I see you, you’re eating.”

“We have an orchard, a garden, the whole works at home. My dad packages something new for me every day and owls it over. I’m right spoiled,” James said, grinning around yet another nut, clenched between his front teeth.

Forgetting that she was meant to be ignoring him, Lily snapped, “You can’t grow pistachios in an English climate. It’s not warm enough.”

“Lean in. I’ll tell you my secret,” James said. When Lily made no move in response, James shifted his chair closer, hovering over her. In a whisper, he said, “We use this thing called magic. Works wonders.”

Lily questioned how she, for so much as a second, thought herself capable of fancying such an irredeemable toad.

“Did you forget?” James asked her, then. Lily contemplated murder before James continued, “That we agreed to meet to work on the project? For Transfiguration? You set the time on Tuesday.”

“Oh, that. You still want to meet? Now?”

“Course. We need to brainstorm some ideas. I’m happy to do all the heavy wandwork for you, Lily, but you’ll need to carry your weight in the presentation and research. I don’t want to have to report you to McGonagall for slacking,” James said.

A scrape of chairs and all her friends rose. Lily turned, frantic, towards them. She shook her head like a begging dog. “Where are you all going?”

“We have class,” Dorcas said, motioning between herself and Will. “Double Potions.”
It was the downside to having friends in other houses. Their class schedules never coincided neatly.

“Mei-Lin, you don’t have class,” Lily pleaded.

“Well…I, no…no, I don’t,” Mei-Lin stammered. The prospect of watching Lily and James bicker held little appeal.

“Please stay,” Lily said. “You can get started on your project alongside of us. It’ll be fun!”

Lily pronounced fun like others might say herpes. Hesitantly, Mei-Lin agreed and returned to her chair. Her eyes flickered nervously between James and Lily.

They wasted no time settling into their work, mostly because Lily wouldn’t allow any non-essential conversation to get off the ground, even if James tried. And he tried.

James was a diligent student and the ideas he brought to the table were sure to impress McGonagall. Unwilling to fully participate, Lily nodded along in silence, jotting down notes.

When they were finished discussing possible topics, Lily marked up her notes with colored ink. She passed the paper off to James with an explanation of the color code.

“So this idea, like it or hate it?” James asked, pointing to a suggestion regarding elemental transfigurations.

“I just explained the coding system,” Lily said shortly.

“Sorry, but I’m color-blind. I can’t read this for shite.”

“What, like you can’t see color?” Lily asked.

“I can see color. My eyes just don’t, you know, translate all of them properly, so a couple get mixed.”

“My uncle’s color-blind,” Mei-Lin chimed in. He can’t see red at all. It just looks black. Red-green color-blindness is super common, especially in men.”

“I have Tritanopia. Incredibly rare,” James said, like it was something to be proud of. “It means I can’t see blue at all. I look up at the sky and see green. No difference between looking down or up for me. Caused so much confusion for my parents when I was two and learning my colors. Yellow’s also out. The sun’s a big violet ball to me.”

“You should become a painter. Your landscapes would be surreal,” Mei-Lin suggested.

Lily was struck by a memory. Barely two weeks earlier, Lily had been overwhelmed by the impulse to master the Patronus charm. She couldn’t place her sudden interest, but she’d tackled the subject with frenzied determination. She’d cycled through a dozen happy memories, none of them powerful enough to produce a Patronus. The closest of her early attempts had been remembering back to the construction of the newspaper in second year, a happy enough memory to emit a few wavering strands of silver from her wand.

Later, she’d had better results – though still no corporeal Patronus – with memories from a family holiday to the sea. They almost never went anywhere as a family even before her mum’s death because money was scarce, but they’d made it to the sea that one time. The ocean had been a steely grey, crashing against rocks worn black with abuse; but there had been one moment, where the sun struck the thrashing waters and everything turned to a dazzling blue, the sea becoming so bright that
Lily could no longer watch the gulls that swooped and dove within its depths. Along the surface, it looked like a million diamonds glittered. She’d been transfixed by the startling beauty, so ephemeral that had she glanced away, she might have missed it entirely. That’s when she had learned that there was no predicting when life’s most beautiful moments would strike; the world and its wonders were too unpredictable.

“I can’t imagine never being able to make out the blue of the ocean,” Lily said quietly.

“Can’t miss what you never knew. Besides, there are worse colors to lose. I can’t imagine never being able to make out red,” James said, his voice oddly thick. His fingers snaked around a tendril of hair that had escaped her bun.

Lily’s breath caught. Yesterday, he rejected her. Today, he flirted outrageously. Nothing had changed between them. Lily remained inconsolably furious with the way he’d taunted her, made a mockery of the feelings she’d developed for him, taken her for granted.

But she was a damn fool because when she looked into his eyes, she saw the ocean looking back.

Friday after classes had ended, Lily typically tutored Quincy Terlep, but he’d sent her a note via first-year (as convenient as owl post!) that he’d be skiving off for the day. Anticipation for the Grindylow party was buzzing through the school, and his mind, like most of those of their classmates, was lost in a world of booze and dancing and sex. It was a wonder the whole school didn’t know what was to take place that night. Lily wondered how she’d missed it in the past.

With her newfound free time, Lily decided it was time to talk to McGonagall. She made it to Classroom 34 just as a stream of Slytherins were let out of a nearby Astronomy lecture. Lily stopped and pressed herself against the wall, pretending to be rifling through her satchel for something in the hopes they’d overlook her. It worked for the most part. Only Desmond Avery and Tisiphone Carrow stopped to pester her.

The two were lovesick idiots, who couldn’t make it to breakfast in the mornings without stopping to snog at least thrice, and as they neared, Lily overheard Desmond instruct Tisiphone to ditch her gum for yet another snog. (Lily would have paid dearly not to hear the explicit terms in which Desmond gave his command.) Obediently, Tisiphone spat a glob of Drooble’s into her freckled palm. She then deposited the gum into Lily’s bun.

“Nice that they’re keeping a rubbish bin outside the classes these days,” Tisiphone said. Clever, though the delivery was a mess as Tisiphone couldn’t help but cackle when playing it straight would’ve burned more.

The rest of the Slytherins turned around to guffaw, and Lily couldn’t fight them all. She ran a few equations in her head instead, something to distract herself, and proceeded into the Transfiguration classroom like she’d always planned. Someday Carrow was going to get hers. Though, she already had to put up with Avery’s trollish mug, so maybe the universe was fair.

Lily vanished the gum from her hair as she entered the classroom. Only McGonagall wasn’t there. Lily checked behind the lectern, between the desks, and in the annex of white stone walls, but no one was there.

McGonagall wasn’t in any of the other Transfiguration classrooms either. Unless she was on duty to monitor the corridors, Lily almost never ran into McGonagall walking through the school and half-believed McGonagall transfigured herself into a cat and padded from place to place, below the eye
line of the student body.

So, Lily trekked back to the first-floor offices, only this time she was intercepted by Peeves, who pelted her with soggy clumps of bread he’d stolen from the kitchens. Lily was half-ready to snap by the time she reached McGonagall’s office. She burst into the office, and leaned heavily against the closed door, simply breathing in relief.

McGonagall was at her desk, and it said something about Lily’s reputation that she didn’t look surprised at the bizarre intrusion.

“Peeves,” Lily said by way of explanation when she’d finally relaxed.

McGonagall nodded once, decisively. “Have a biscuit, Miss Evans.”

Embers sputtered inside the waning fire by the desk. Lily scooted the chair opposite McGonagall as far from the fire as possible. Today, McGonagall was serving chocolate-covered digestives, and Lily scooped four onto a tea plate.

“I suspect I know why you’re here,” McGonagall said.

McGonagall swung around in her chair to face the intimidating shelf of books behind her. From the bottom row she pulled what was easily the thickest book and slammed it on the desk in front of Lily.

“Errr…”

“A chapter a week. Read on a Monday and spend the rest of the week practicing,” McGonagall instructed. “It will be difficult, but this is an intervention. If you stick to it for the year, I can guarantee you’ll pass your NEWT.”

“But Professor –”

“No, no, Miss Evans. I know you. I know you underestimate yourself. You think Transfiguration should be inherent, but it’s not. We all achieve our results through hard work and discipline. You can do this,” McGonagall said.

“But I don’t care about passing my Transfiguration NEWT!”

When Minerva McGonagall joined the Hogwarts staff, hearty with the sureness of her calling – to make a difference in the lives of her students – she probably hadn’t anticipated a seventeen-year-old’s capacity for ungratefulness. Her mouth all but disappeared as she sucked in a breath, and Lily winced at her lack of tact.

“That is…I do care about passing my Transfiguration NEWT. Thank you for thinking of me and my future, Professor. You’re so kind,” Lily said.

Lily reached to take the book off the desk, but McGonagall swiped it away with quick hands. Lily laughed nervously.

“Why are you here, Miss Evans?”

“I was hoping you could give me some information on school policy. You see, well, I think it’s best I just spit it out. I’ve been invited to a Grindylow party, and I’ve heard some mixed information on whether or not those are acceptable. Mei-Lin told me that the Grindylows were banned altogether, which would imply their events are as well. But then, Emmeline Vance told me that no one minds. Then, there’s the fact that parties after curfew are forbidden in general, regardless of who throws
them, and I guess you can say I’m confused. You know me. I don’t like to break school rules,” Lily said, smiling like an idiot to mask the lie.

“Technically, school rules banned the Grindylows several centuries ago. However, that ban applied to them as an official school club. There is no rule stating that unofficial clubs cannot organize and do as they please,” McGonagall said.

“Right.”

“But all school rules apply to unofficial clubs as well, so if something – say an after-hours party – would be banned for the Gobstones club, it’s equally unacceptable from the Grindylows,” McGonagall said.

“Right.”

“That said, I think the whole staff would agree that students should be able to gather and have fun in celebration of some of Hogwarts’ oldest traditions,” McGonagall said.

“Right. Wait, what?”

Like they were in an old-Western stand-off, Lily and McGonagall stared each other down. McGonagall appeared to be advocating a breaking of school rules, but she wouldn’t say it outright. Meanwhile, Lily wasn’t willing to speculate. She needed something concrete for her story. No misunderstandings.

“I am saying that any after-hours parties are forbidden. Tonight, however, no staff will be patrolling the west side of the castle or the Forbidden Forest. Mr. Filch has been given strict orders to turn his attentions to the east side of the castle, and Mr. Hagrid will be retiring early for the night,” McGonagall said. “You should feel free to have fun…so long as all school rules are followed.”

Half a bite into her digestive, Lily returned it to the plate. The chocolate tasted bitter now, and her stomach was roiling. She was disappointed, no disgusted, with McGonagall, and it showed on her face.

“Thank you for speaking with me, Professor. I have a lot of homework, though, so I better…”

McGonagall stopped her at the door. “Evans! Let’s be frank with one another. You’ve never cared for school rules. What’s this all about?”

Fortunately, Lily had come armed with the perfect lie. “I want to be Head Girl next year, Professor.”

“Oh, Miss Evans.”

It was pity. Fifth-year, she’d been made one of the Gryffindor prefects alongside Duane Hinkle. At the time, it had made sense. Lily’s marks were surpassed by both Mei-Lin and Emmeline, but she made up for the deficit with her involvement in school activities. It was the kind of distinction her sister could actually respect as well, and Lily had felt proud the first time she pinned the badge to her robes. Petunia had even taken a photo before she boarded the train.

Only two months into the role, however, everyone had realized that Lily wasn’t the obvious choice for school prefect, like everyone had believed. She missed nearly half of the year’s prefect meetings, citing competing responsibilities. She never took enough notice of her fellow students to take points, and the few times she was called upon to intercede in an altercation, she let the students talk her out of any consequences. She always attended rounds – a prefect’s most essential job – but she’d arrive so exhausted from an overstuffed day, that she’d fall asleep on her feet, and that only if she didn’t try
to cram some homework into the two-hour period.

Lily was an unequivocal failure as a prefect. As a joke, Alvin Weasley nominated her as the worst prefect in Hogwarts history.

Come the end of the schoolyear, it almost wasn’t a surprise when Lily was summoned before McGonagall for the bad news: she wouldn’t be serving as prefect in the coming year. By unanimous decision, the staff had decided Emmeline would better fulfill the requirements of the role. They couched the bad news by reassuring Lily they were simply worried she was overworking herself straight for a mental breakdown, but Lily knew the truth.

To imagine she might ever serve as Head Girl was the height of delusion, and it shut McGonagall right up. Outside McGonagall’s office, there was no sign of Peeves, so Lily walked the corridors harassed. Only after she was halfway to the library did the meaning of McGonagall’s words click for Lily. McGonagall had told her no one would be patrolling the Forbidden Forest or the west side of the castle that overlooked the grounds, which meant McGonagall knew exactly where the party was slated to take place.

In the middle of the corridor, with a sea of students on all sides, Lily stopped dead. “Goddamnit!”

With the way the Grindylows party had been heralded from all corners, Lily had half expected that the heavens themselves would not dare interfere with the lauded event. Yet the hour of the party arrived and the rain barreled down with the same vigor, turning the grounds of the castle into a slick canvas of mud. The elements answered to no club, living or dead.

Dressing to suit her agenda – loosening tongues and blending in – had been Lily’s intention, but one look outside had convinced her to forgo a short skirt and opt for something bland yet durable: functional rain boots, a jumper and a parka over top. Her only concessions were the snug fit of her trousers and the extra five minutes she’d spent trying and failing to replicate the makeup Mary had applied previously. On the whole, she looked like she was setting out on a hiking expedition rather than attending a party.

Lily had been surprised and, admittedly, hurt, when she finished up in the loo only to find that her dormmates had already left for the party without her. They’d spent so many hours discussing the party together that Lily had wrongly assumed they would all go together. Alone, she walked to the Forbidden Forest, comforting herself by mentally reviewing her plans.

The dull noise of the party reached her before anything else, and when she pushed past the boundary of the tree line, the volume rose to a full crescendo. Impossibly, on the other side of the trees, there was a clearing – completely unnatural, the trees around it all leaned it, almost like they yearned to snap back into their original positions. Filling the clearing was a yellow tent, which served to shield the crowd of partygoers from the elements.

Not until she pierced the heart of the crowd did she see the crowning glory of the party: the fountain. Standing eight meters tall, the fountain spewed different called liquids from a dozen jets. Quincy Terlep stood before it, body angled away but head leaned into the thick of the fountain so that he could catch a brown stream in his open mouth. When he finished, he shouted “Rum!” to the crowd of onlookers and was met by cheers of approval.

It was complex magic, so much so that Lily breathed, “How on earth did they manage this?”

While her question was intended for the ether, she was met with a reply by Remus, who was
standing nearby. “Just one of the many mysteries of the Grindylows. Can I get you a drink?”

Lily agreed, and then asked, “Do our hosts have many mysteries?”

She accepted the glass of whiskey – caught straight from the fountain – that Remus offered. The sudden sting of alcohol made her grimace. Oaky and almost like toffee, the after-taste was pleasant, but it didn’t compensate for the shock of each sip. Courageously, Lily swallowed another gulp.

In the realm of drinking, she was an utter novice. Lily had drunk exactly three times before: in third-year, alongside Will, during what she viewed as the height of scientific experimentation; two glasses of wine with Mei-Lin’s parents over a summer holiday; over dinner with Mei-Lin’s parents – wine and a hot summer’s night; and at the muggle party she’d attended that summer.

“I dunno. They certainly want us to think they have many mysteries, and I have to say, it would be a disappointment to find out the Grindylows are all talk,” Remus said thoughtfully.

“What kind of mystery would satisfy your expectations?” Lily probed.

Remus played along, “I think there needs to be at least one cover-up of a horrific crime. A fighting ring of Cornish pixies. Maybe some illegal animal breeding.”

“You make them sound like a criminal organization,” Lily said.

“Who knows? Maybe they’re the villains behind every terrible event in wizarding history. Or, maybe they’re just a bunch of teenagers getting drunk in a forest. Pick your poison.”

“I think you’re wrong entirely. I think they have a fighting ring of gnomes.”

Remus laughed, not remotely suspicious of her intentions. Not wanting to tip him off, Lily thought carefully how best to continue the conversation on more concrete grounds.

“I bet my galleons that the Grindylows are made up of hundreds of ancient old men. There are no members currently enrolled at Hogwarts, and these old geezers just send their invitations and relive their school days. I imagine it’s hell trying to find a convention hall big enough to fit them all,” Lily said.

“I’m not sure about that theory. There are only nine members a year, so I imagine they could cram into a convention hall at least. The leader’s sitting room if not everyone comes to the reunions,” Remus said.

“Nine?” Lily barely suppressed the urge to jump up and down. “How do you know that?”

Remus scratched his head. “I think it’s common knowledge, isn’t it? Nine’s the perfect number, so they elect nine members.”

“I thought three was the perfect number.”

Something of an Arithmancy swot – a subject Lily admired but professed no mastery of – Remus wasted no time in giving Lily a long lecture on the debate among numerologists regarding which number was the most meaningful. Many placed their faith in seven as the most powerful number, but three was perfect, and as nine captured three exactly three times, it was celebrated by yet another group as the supreme number. The founding students of the Grindylows had weighed in on the debate themselves, determining nine to represent true perfection. There were nine planets in the solar system and, better yet, nine letters in “Grindylow.”
Before she could frame her next question, Remus interjected, “You know, I’m surprised to see you here.”

“Why? I said I was coming,” Lily countered.

“Well, I suppose, but that was before–”

The tail of his sentence was unnecessary and, thankfully, never finished. Caught in the middle of a heated argument, Mary and Sirius drew close to the fountain. Sirius was practically foaming at the mouth, arms whipping through the air to punctuate his fury, while Mary stared determinedly at the cup she was refilling, refusing to acknowledge his distress.

“You really have nothing to say? After everything I just told you? You walk away?” Sirius shouted. “You know, it’s not pleasant dating a block of ice!”

“We’re not dating,” Mary corrected coldly.

“Oh, of course, I apologize. I meant to say it’s not pleasant to stick my dick into a block of ice,” Sirius said.

“Does sound stupid,” Mary agreed.

“Merlin, Mare, just…I’m trying to tell you something important, to be open with you, and you’re just…”

Even though Sirius was the one screaming and carrying on like a prat, Lily couldn’t help but sympathize. She knew that Sirius wasn’t the sort to show any vulnerability outside his circle of mates. To take the leap of faith in another person only to have them stomp on your affection, well, Lily could understand that perfectly. It hurt bitterly, and all that pain was writ large on Sirius’s every gesture.

“I’m going to find Emmeline,” Mary announced, eyes drifting across the party.

Sirius kicked the fountain. Immediately, Remus moved to distract him. His hands wrapped tightly around Sirius’s arm to drag him away, heads bent together so that Remus could whisper – words of comfort or warning it was hard to say – in Sirius’s ear. Lily was left alone once more.

Drifting aimlessly through the party, Lily observed the different groups that gathered, twisted, and separated again. There was Cheryl O’Hannigan and Michaela Curtis – Gryffindor seventh-years – just like Marlene had promised. A bloc of Slytherins was headed by Danquah Badoe, who had always intimidated Lily to distraction. The clique of popular Hufflepuff girls – Nadia Kovalenko, Bobby Rice, Momo Suzuki, and Gina Parrish – stood laughing at something Quincy Terlep had said. Her Ancient Runes pupil preened at the attention. As far as Lily could see, there was no opening for her to join anywhere. Everyone else knew each other too well, had defined the lines while she wasn’t looking.

To give her an excuse for not speaking to anyone, she sipped at her drink until she was lapping at the droplets collected at the bottom of the cup.

Without speaking to anyone, Lily figured she could still make some substantial discoveries. To start, she figured the Grindylows must have a patron, an alum who assisted with their party orchestration, because the fountain – its magic and size – was beyond anything a Hogwarts student could manage. Second, the members must be at the party, so by process of elimination, she could cross some students off her suspect list. (Though, this was harder than she’d imagined as it seemed that everyone but Lily’s set of friends had been invited.)
Amidst the beautiful faces Lily had expected, there was Brian Fields, a fourth-year, pre-pubescent, talking to Tammyra Booth, who was notoriously shy. Dylan O’Reilly, who was in seventh-year and a Slytherin, smoked a joint at the fringes of the party; he’d always been a loner, not the popular type at all. And, most surprisingly, Lily spotted Severus by the fountain, pretended she didn’t feel his eyes track her as she hurriedly reversed directions.

Having made her way to the opposite side of the tent in her escape, Lily looked into the deepest tangle of the wood. The wind had picked up the rain and sent it speeding toward the party at a nearly ninety-degree angle. The enchantments upon the tent shielded them from the weather, and Lily watched as the raindrops slid straight to the ground, like rain streaking down an invisible windowpane.

There was something disturbing about the Grindylows’ decision to host the party in the Forbidden Forest. It was a declaration of war against the natural order, introducing civility into the center of the carnal chaos of the forest.

“Oh, Lily!” A very drunk, very disoriented Marlene toppled into Lily, clutching at the front of her jacket to stay upright even as Lily nearly fell out of the protected enclosure herself. “You’re here! I wasn’t expecting to see you here!”

Lily carefully set Marlene to rights and took a measured step back to reintroduce some distance. Small and uninhibited, Marlene resembled an overeager bunny. Her hair, magicked a gunmetal grey for the occasion, had run riotous atop her head and residue from her mascara left pinpricks up to her brow line.

“You’re the second person to say that to me today,” Lily said. “I was invited by the Grindylows, not James Potter. I’m not going to stay in just because we’re rowing.”

“But, I mean, James Potter and the Grindylows, go hand-in-hand,” Marlene explained. “Never have a party without him.”

“What, like he’s a member?” Lily asked a bit too fiercely.

“Well, I’d assume so. I mean, he seems the type, doesn’t he?” Marlene said.

Lily tried to pry out a few more names from Marlene, asking her to guess at other members, but Marlene was prone to distraction. Marlene stopped their conversation to greet nearly every student who passed. Several times, Lily had to grip Marlene’s wrist to prevent her from swanning off to talk to someone else. To keep her attention, Lily turned to the one subject she knew always delighted Marlene: gossip.

“So, I saw Snape was here. Wasn’t expecting that,” Lily said.

Marlene’s eyes lit up. “Oh, that’s right. You two don’t get along at all anymore, do you? Have you spoken since that ugly Mudblood thing last year?”

“No.”

“I always despised him. I mean, he’s so cold all the time, and then he opens his mouth, and he’s calling you a brainless worm or something else awful. And it would be one thing if he was outstanding at something, you can get away with a lot if you’re brilliant at Quidditch or fitter than Quincy, but he’s got nothing to back it up,” Marlene prattled.

“He’s excellent at Potions,” Lily volunteered.
“I mean something that matters, Lily,” Marlene laughed.

“I’m just surprised he was invited,” Lily said, gently steering the conversation away from opinions on Severus Snape.

“I know!” Marlene practically exploded. “It makes literally no sense. He’s never been to one of these parties before, and now he’s suddenly here? I don’t want to be the one to say it, but standards may be dropping.”

Somehow another glass of firewhisky landed in Lily’s hand, and she drank it idly, only half-listening as Marlene continued onto another rant about Severus. The evidence pointed to Severus as a member of the Grindylows: a new invite, no obvious friends who would have lobbied for his attendance, a perfect fit. Irrationally, Lily found herself disappointed.

“Do you think Sirius is a member?” Lily tried, bored of Marlene’s indictment of Severus, its accuracy notwithstanding.

“No way,” Marlene shook her head. “Because Mary would totally know, and if Mary knew, then I’d know. We don’t keep secrets from each other.”

“After the fight I just saw, I wouldn’t be surprised if Sirius never tells Mary anything again,” Lily said.

That bit of gossip turned out to be a mistake. Marlene listened with rapt attention – all her previous flightiness suppressed, a memory only – as Lily explained what she had overheard. Afterwards, Marlene all but ran away to find Mary. Marlene said she was worried about her friend, and Lily wanted to correct her, to tell her that Sirius was the one in need of comforting, but Marlene had already disappeared into the crowd.

Despite Lily’s best intentions to remain focused on her investigation, the party and her buzz took an unexpected turn, which shattered her discipline. All of the lights went out, plunging the party into a momentary darkness, only to be replaced a second later with bursts of glowing neon color. The fabric of the tent had been splashed with what looked like the insides of a glow stick. Everyone oohed and ahhed as the colors took on a life of their own, slithering along the tent’s surface, forming shapes and telling stories. They painted a Grindylow dragging a girl down into the depths of a lake; a game of Quidditch where one of the chasers rode a dragon into the match; Dumbledore tap-dancing to McGonagall’s applause.

Lily felt drunk on the lights as much as the firewhisky. While entranced by the show, her drinking grew more liberal. The boring transformed into something interesting as the liquor hit her bloodstream. Somehow, she became wrapped up in an involved conversation on Gobstones, a game she had never enjoyed, with Quan Ngo. A joke about a morning erection nearly made her double over with laughter. She felt inexplicably fond of students who had never warranted her attention in the past.

Half an hour later, Lily found herself beside Tristan Codrington, which was a feat as he was always swarmed by admirers. Several classmates would be sporting bruises from when Lily unwittingly elbowed her way into his immediate bubble. Tristan was a Ravenclaw sixth-year, smart, albeit in an academic way, and muggleborn. As she’d stumbled past, Lily had overheard him mention the recent resignation of Wilson – the news of the prime minister’s retirement had only broken the week before – and she’d been unable to resist joining the fray, eager to talk about the current economic situation.

Political maneuverings didn’t interest her, but she loved economics: papers and figures and theorems that could be quantified and applied as a framework to the current world. Tristan made the mistake of
mentioning the high unemployment under Labour, and Lily was off, detailing how the current situation was merely a byproduct of the lingering effects of Conservative policies.

Several times, Tristan tried to edge away from her, and each time, Lily gripped his arm and held tight. “Inflation was in the twenties, Codrington. The twenties! And it’s only just now starting to return to acceptable figures.”

“You’re right, Lily.”

“I know I’m right!”

A flash of red hair signaled Emmeline slipping past, but Tristan didn’t allow her to get far. He grabbed her by the shoulders and dragged her in front of Lily. “Emmeline, your roommate has some very interesting opinions. Why don’t you tell her all about them, Evans? I’m sure she’ll be fascinated.”

With that, he was gone.

Lily smiled brightly at Emmeline. “I don’t actually hate the Conservatives, you know. My father has to deal with the union at his mill all the time, and he says they’re completely unreasonable. Plus, the Conservatives have a woman in charge! They can’t be all bad.”

“I don’t keep up with muggle politics,” Emmeline said.

Her tone was cold enough that it pierced through the haze in Lily’s mind, and she petered off with a quiet, “Oh…well, um, I’m glad you convinced me to come. I’m having a lot of fun.”

“That’s good.”

Lily worried she was just drunk enough to demand answers from Emmeline. Just what had happened between them to bring them to this point? Why couldn’t they be friends again?

To avoid the temptation, Lily changed the subject, “That fountain is spectacular, isn’t it? The magic is so complicated. A replenishing charm maintained on a dozen different jets, and they had to use magic to get it here in the first place. Just really impressive stuff.”

“It is pretty, isn’t it?” Emmeline agreed with a small smile.

“No way a student pulled that off,” Lily continued. “The Grindylows must have some sort of patron because that’s magnificent magic. Adult stuff.”

“I think you underestimate your classmates, Lily.”

Lily sighed in half-hearted agreement. “You’re right. I guess the Marauders could manage something like this if they work together.”

Perhaps she’d summoned up some accidental magic because the mere reference to James conjured him into existence at her side.

“If it isn’t my two favorite redheads!” James said, wrapping a friendly arm around Emmeline’s shoulders, an arm that she immediately shrugged off. “Talking about me?”

“I hate to say it but yes,” Emmeline said.

James turned to Lily with a triumphant smirk. He had clearly been visiting the fountain because his eyes were shining behind his specs. The messy hair atop his head had run riot, patches sticking
straight up like he’d doused it in hair gel. There was a frenetic energy to him, like he knew the night had only just begun and there were adventures to be found behind every corner if he were to only look.

“Happy birthday by the way,” Emmeline said, kissing his cheek.

James presented his other cheek to Lily for a similar congratulations, but she remained unmoved. She was more likely to give his face a slap than a kiss based on their recent interactions.

“Do you have a present for me?” James asked Lily eagerly.

She snorted.

“Come on! It’s my birthday. I was hoping we could make nice at the very least,” James said.

He was clearly high on something.

“Like the Stones said, you can’t always get what you want,” Lily grit out.

“Ah, but you’re forgetting the second part.” He leaned in and chucked her under the chin, a scrape of knuckles that brought the scent of his aftershave into sharp relief. “Sometimes you get what you need.”

“Go snog your date,” Lily ordered.

“Really?”

“It would keep you from opening your big, ugly mouth, so yeah, nothing would make me happier,” Lily said. Both of her hands gravitated to her hips, and she glared into his unrepentant face. If there’d been a chair at hand, she’d have climbed atop it so that she could tower over him.

“It’s my birthday, Lily,” James tried again, adopting his best hopeful dog expression. “Can’t you be nice to me just for the night?”

“Tell you what, you obliviate my memories of you telling me I ought to wait around for you while you shag every girl in the school, and I just might manage a smile,” Lily snarled.

“You’re putting words in my mouth.” James said. A muscle ticked in his jaw.

Lily looked around for a friendly face, hoping to make an escape, but found no refuge. Everyone blended together, and she hardly recognized anyone. In contrast, she saw James with blinding clarity.

“If you want a present go find one of your mates,” Lily suggested. “I’m sure Sirius has something for you.”

“I doubt it,” James said dully.

Lily didn’t think too much about his answer, too busy concocting ways to rid herself of her despised housemate. “Fine, but you ought to find him anyway. He’s had a row with Mary, and I imagine he’ll want to see you.”

“The last thing Sirius will want is to see me,” James said, another inscrutable answer, so much so, that even Lily couldn’t miss it.

She opened her mouth to ask just what he meant when a sudden uproar caught both their attention. Peter had climbed into the fountain and was bathing in a shower of giggle juice. James slapped at his
knees and howled words of support. He pat Lily’s shoulder in farewell, even as she tried to slap his hand away, and moved toward Peter. Sometime during Lily’s argument with James, Emmeline had disappeared. Lily was left alone again.

Lily slammed back her next drink and the one after that. She wandered toward the group of partygoers engaged in drinking games. They were busy in a game of Jinx the Sphinx. It was an icebreaker where people partnered asking and answering questions in turn to learn more about their partner; the questions were supplied by a deck of cards. The deck was charmed and failure to answer adequately would drop the air around the player six degrees. Legend had it that an inebriated Wesley Morris had been carted to the Hospital Wing with frostbite in six of his toes after failing to answer six questions in a row. The penalty for lying, heaven forbid, was worse.

When Constance Arnolds tried to pull Lily into the game with her toothy smile, Lily shrugged away, uninterested; but then she saw Sirius, alone and dour, and something stopped Lily in her tracks. It was a party for his best mate, a party for his secret society, but Sirius spent it licking his wounds in the corner, emotionally abandoned by the girl he cared about and, after James’ strangely ambiguous words, she worried his friends as well. Lily accepted a chunk of the deck.

“You!” she shouted in Sirius’s direction. “You laughed at me in my humiliation, so now you’re going to partner with me, and you’re going to have fun. Got it?”

Sirius jolted, casting about warily, “Seriously?”

“I don’t know. You tell me,” Lily said, and then she presented him with her fiercest glare.

Sirius didn’t exactly cower in the wake of it, but he did make room for her to sit on the stool beside him, low to the ground so that her knees were directly parallel to her chest. They looked like giants in a playhouse, and while Lily wasn’t petite, she’d never been confused for a giant either.

“You know how to play?” Lily asked, passing him the deck of cards.

“Of course. Want to introduce any additional penalties for failing to answer?” Sirius said. He shuffled the deck with a flourish, the cards dancing between his palms.

“Seeing as I’m not a coward, not sure why we’d need one,” Lily shot back.

There didn’t exist a question that she wouldn’t gladly answer. Even the subjects that made her want to curl up in a ball and cry – her mum, Petunia, Severus – weren’t off limits. The truth had never harmed anyone; the same could not be said for lies.

“Fine,” Sirius said with a challenging tilt to his chin.

He was playing along per her demand and doing so convincingly, but there was an absence in his voice that hinted his mind was still far away. The chosen top card bearing the first question earned a chuckle from Sirius.

“Well, Evans, this one’s a thinker. How honest are you about your thoughts and feelings?”

It wasn’t a question that required an answer, and Lily burst out laughing. The sound dragged Sirius unwillingly in as well. Each of them cast back to memories of Lily hilariously or disastrously blurting out the truth with nary a thought to the consequences. There was their first meeting on the Hogwarts Express, where Lily took umbrage to a joke Sirius told, so she stared him straight in the eye and declared, “I don’t like you;” the time she’d announced she had diarrhea to the whole of her Charms class because ‘everybody poops’ and Flitwick preferred his students hold it whenever possible; the minutes immediately following the first time she had sex, lying flat on her back beside her then
boyfriend, Andy, and telling him plainly that it hadn’t been very enjoyable, but with hard work on both their parts, she was sure they could improve.

A chill entered the air, so Lily hurried to answer before her hilarity earned her a penalty. “I’m pretty bloody honest. I may not be the best at articulating my thoughts, but I don’t try to hide them. If you’re close enough to me to care about what I think and feel, I figure there’s no need to hide it!”

The temperature steadied.

Satisfied, Lily plucked a new card from the deck. “Alright, Black, do you believe in the existence of true love or soulmates?”

Lily asked like it was some great joke, but Sirius’s answer was devoid of humor.

“Of course. I’ve seen truly despicable people, the worst people you can imagine, find someone to love them. They have their equally horrid match out there. If there’s a man to fall in love with my wretched cousin, then there’s someone who can love each and every one of us. Look at swans.”

“Swans?”

“Two swans find each other and bond years before they’re ready to mate, and what’s that if not love, a love that lasts a lifetime,” Sirius said.

“Well, actually,” Lily began, “Swans only mate for life because –”

He placed his finger firmly to her lips with a stern expression. “Don’t ruin the romance.”

Romance wasn’t something Lily had ever connected with Sirius Black, he of the vulgar tongue and casual sex with Mary, but she dutifully held her tongue.

“How about this one,” Sirius said, nodding approvingly at the next card. “In your opinion, what is the evilest thing a person can do?”

Plump Scottish wood ants scuttled around the obstruction of her left boot. They formed a long line of industry, and Lily wondered whether it wouldn’t be unforgivably evil to reach out and crush just one of them.

Evil was a difficult concept to grasp. It wasn’t concrete, a fact of science or something she could easily observe in her daily life. Lily had never had call to witness a murder, a rape, an assault; she’d escaped exposure to the most fundamental foulness of humanity. She’d seen her fair share of cruelty, but she hesitated to classify those moments as genuinely evil.

Slowly, because the idea wasn’t entirely formed in her mind, Lily said, “Try to poison the world. I think… I think it’s more about intent than action. Loads of people do loathsome things, but they think it’s justified and good. While I still think those actions can be evil, I sympathize with the people doing them because how can you know something that you don’t? You can’t know what you don’t know… What I can’t stand are the people who do know that their actions are terrible and pursue them anyway. I just, if you’ve given up on humanity to that extent… well, isn’t that evil?”

Left unsaid was her perfect example: Severus, formerly hers and now just a memory of a boy long gone. On a brisk autumn day earlier that year, she’d seen Severus kick a first-year as he’d huddled on the ground. Mulciber had sent the child reeling for standing in his way, and even though the boy sat, quiet and terrified on the solid dirt of the grounds, Severus had still landed his spiteful little kick.

It was a memory tinged red. She could have clawed his eyes out to give outlet to the fury that had
overwhelmed her. When she comforted the child afterward, the cheek the boy pressed to her shoulder was cold and wet. Severus never tried to justify his actions. To her, in the days when he still pretended to value her opinion, he simply denied them, and later, when he no longer owed Lily even these paltry explanations, he celebrated his misdeeds. He didn’t need to justify himself because he’d removed morality from the equation. Like evil, morality couldn’t be codified; comfortable in the world of particulars – a carefully measured cup of aconite fluid, three stirs, pick your foxglove on the third full moon of the year – it was an easy matter for Severus to first scoff at and then fully dismiss the subjective world of ethics.

“Evil’s not about intent. It’s about action,” Sirius said, ignoring that it was common manners not to criticize someone’s answer in a game of Jinx the Sphinx.

The mood had altered, and the next question Lily read did little to improve it. “Under what circumstances could you murder someone? And the card means murder, not kill in self-defense or euthanize someone who’s desperate. Murder.”

“I could kill easily. Anyone who threatened my friends. Anyone who presents a danger to the few genuinely good people in the world. Anyone I truly hated.”

Lily swallowed. A branch hung low behind them, casting a shadow along the back of the tent. It looked like a grasping hand. Sirius’s voice as he spoke sounded the way the shadows looked, dark and ungraspable, hinting at a forest brimming with secrets. Something, maybe in his childhood, had transformed Sirius, exposed him to the evil that to Lily only existed in the realm of speculation.

For the first time, Lily understood the appeal of Sirius Black. He stood on a precipice where the smallest misstep might send him spiraling into despair, and she wanted to drag him back. The same way James and Remus and all the girls who had looked upon him with desire wanted to save him, so did Lily. She wanted to see him smile.

Lily’s nose scrunched up in concentration as he searched for the words. Then, “Black, Black, you’re such a sad sack / Black, Black, cheeriness you lack. / I don’t mean to give you flack. / But smile, or you’ll get a smack!”

Immediately afterward, she burst into laughter at her own genius. Her cackles drowned out the laughter that she was sure came from Sirius as well, because who could possibly listen to something so clever without a chuckle? She was the bard incarnate.

“What the living fuck?” The whites of Sirius’s eyes had never been so large. “You’re bloody mental.”

“Just cheering you up. Note that I kept the syllables consistent in each line. I’m something of a poet,” Lily said pleasantly, brushing at her shoulders to remove imaginary lint.

“Keep your day job, Evans,” Sirius ordered.

“By night I deliver the poems. By day, I write them,” Lily said.

“You should have at least gone with: Black, Black, you give the girls a heart attack. You’re just leaving material on the table,” Sirius said mournfully.

“Nah, better would have been: Black, Black, when the girls see you they yack.”

Neither of them could last after that and the force field of gloom that had surrounded them shattered into pieces. They gasped for breath as they laughed, not knowing why their amateur rhyming was so funny but feeling it deep in their bellies. They were both drunk and happy, and Lily’s heart throbbed
with the joy of it. She would be sad again, angry again, and the knowledge of the eventual drop made the high feel even better. She thought it might be how Sirius felt every day.

Sirius’s laugh was the only unrefined thing about him, repeated staccato notes followed by a loud breath as he sucked in oxygen, only to repeat. No one would ever compare that laugh to music, to the sweet song of a morning bird, but she wanted that discordance in her life, more than she wanted the new Queen album.

They continued to talk, to laugh. She noticed his hand rest against her wrist, two fingers placed against her pulse, and it sped up at the realization. Bodies jostled them closer together. He smelled like a winter morning, and she looked like the crest of spring. The senses were turned poetic under a haze of alcohol. They began to dance – among a throng of grinding bodies – but they didn’t press close together. Instead, he spun her around and around and around, a little bit of her identity, her memories falling away with each twirl. There went her goals, and there went her introspection, and oops, her name had fallen away as well.

And all that distance turned magnetic, so that when they finally closed the gap, Lily was smiling.

Chapter End Notes

I promise the cliffhanger in every chapter is not going to be so annoying as this and the last one haha. Hope everyone has a great week!
Oh my gosh another update? I’ll explain why at the end because it is related to the content of this chapter. I’ll say now, however, that this isn’t going to become a regular thing because despite some really awesome/fast writing of late that I’m really excited about, I need to get out to at least chapter 18 before I start updating on a faster schedule.

On a less pleasant note, guys can’t believe I have to say this, but if you’re leaving a negative review, please make sure it’s only negatively aimed at the writing/characters/Me. Any reviews that start disparaging real life groups or perpetuating negativity towards them are going to be deleted immediately. Meaning, don’t make nasty, ableist comparisons between the characters and people who are neuroatypical. Just…don’t make me upset to check my email, guys. (In case anyone is afraid this is somehow about them, I deleted the review, so if yours is still there, you’re fine!)

Also thanks again to Corinaj for beta’ing this chapter and being a help with the process!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Memory.

Of the gifts bestowed by the gods, evolution, the universe – take your pick – memory was probably the most valuable. Human beings were storytellers, and memory allowed them to craft narratives they could apply to make sense of their own lives: to tell a story with a beginning, middle, and end. These stories sat at the very core of people’s self-definition: I was born, I lived, I died.

And yet, memory was far from a trustworthy ally. It was as ephemeral as life, as shifting as a river’s current. Memory was a valuable thing, and like all valuable things, it could be stolen.

Lily awoke to the bustle of a castle already alive for several hours. The late afternoon hour would have been enough to panic her, but she was more startled by the strip of bacon that tickled the crevice of skin above her lip. Lily jolted into a sitting position, and the piece of bacon went flying, lost amidst the mess of covers on her bed. Appreciative of the security that came with being tightly bundled, Lily slept beneath a plain sheet, a navy comforter, a patchwork quilt, and the baby blanket her grandmother had knit for her return from the hospital.

Mei-Lin, bright-eyed and eager, peeked through the semi-sheer coverings that surrounded Lily’s four-poster. A plate of bacon poked through as well.

“Good morning, you party animal,” Mei-Lin said cheerfully.

“Is it still morning?” Lily asked, hopeful that she’d misjudged the height of the sun.

“Sadly, no. It’s nearly three in the afternoon, but I brought you lunch. Can you eat? Or are you in the grips of your first hangover?”

“I feel fine,” Lily said.

It was true. Her mind cast about tentatively, frightened that she’d find one of the many after-effects
that punished heavy drinkers, but her head was clear and her stomach settled. Her throat was
dreadfully dry, though, a scorched desert. She gladly took the glass of pumpkin juice proffered by
Mei-Lin and polished the goblet off in one hearty go.

“Wait one second,” Mei-Lin said, “I need to get Will. He’s been dying to talking to you all morning,
and he’ll murder us both if we start without him.”

Lily barely questioned why Will wanted to talk to her. She was too busy having palpitations over the
number of hours she’d lost to her indulgent lie-in. Six hours gone! First thing, she’d want to jot all
her observations from the party down. Homework was a bust for the day, but she could maybe
squeeze her Herbology essay in before dinner.

It didn’t take more than a minute for Will to come trooping up the stairs after Mei-Lin. They’d
discovered that the charmed staircase took no umbrage to Will’s visits in second-year, and with it,
Will had banished from his mind any slight suspicions that he might have been wrong about the
whole not interested in girls thing.

“Love, tell us everything,” Will demanded, tossing himself bodily into bed alongside Lily, who
ceded the space begrudgingly.

Lily spoke around a piece of bacon. “The biggest discovery is that there are nine members of the
Grindylows. Remus said it was common knowledge, but it’s going to be a huge help in limiting
down the suspect pool.”

“Lil, no offense, but I could care less about the paper right now. Tell me all about Black!” Will said.

“Um, what?”

She recalled their game from the party with perfect clarity, as well as the dancing and boisterous
laughter. But, as her mind sorted through the party, she realized there were substantial gaps. Namely,
there was a beginning and there was a middle, but the end of the party was a shapeless blur. She
didn’t remember going to bed at all.

“Oh my God!” Lily wailed. She’d attended the party to investigate, and she couldn’t even remember
what she’d learned. What if Sirius had confessed every secret of the Grindylows to her, and she’d let
it spill away, like her mind was a sieve or an overfilled bathtub.

Fortunately, Mei-Lin and Will didn’t spare her in recounting what they knew of her blank spots.

Around 2am, Mei-Lin had been woken by someone bellowing her name at the foot of the stairs.
She’d gone down, borderline homicidal, to see what the fuss was about, only to find Sirius – very
drunk – supporting Lily – also very drunk. According to Mei-Lin, Lily had also been very randy as
she kept trying to snog Sirius, even as he explained to Mei-Lin that he needed help getting Lily
upstairs and into bed. Not that Sirius had been unaccepting of these kisses as he’d given her a very
long and very thorough kiss before delivering her into Mei-Lin’s waiting arms.

“Your infiltration skills are really second-to-none,” Mei-Lin said.


“You say that like it’s something half the school hasn’t tried,” Will joked.

Of course, Will was right. Sirius’s lips had a certain…familiarity with the girls in their surrounding
years. Still, Lily was wracked with disbelief. The Sirius Black that drove her into a frothing fury in
defense of Severus only a few years ago, the very same Sirius Black who made raunchy jokes
flirting with all the prefects, and the very same Sirius Black who had antagonized her only days before was now the Sirius Black who she’d snogged like a drunken mess in the common room.

She probably ought to feel embarrassed.

Not that she did. Oh no, Lily was far too devastated by the realization that she could have lost valuable insights into the world of the Grindylows.

“I am the world’s greatest fuck up,” Lily announced. Will was busy snacking away at her bacon, and in a fit of pique, she snatched a piece right out of his hand, chewing on it mutinously.

“Oh, I haven’t even told you the best part yet,” Mei-Lin said.

Perhaps bothered by her bacon thievery, Will filled in the blanks with obvious relish, “While you were snogging at the foot of the stairs, Potter and his mates came back. Saw the whole thing.”

Lily choked on the bacon.

With several hearty slaps to her back, Will helped her dislodge the errant piece. Her coughs mingled with Will’s pleased snickering. Once her throat finally cleared, Lily demanded that Mei-Lin tell her everything, leaving no micro-expression or twitch from the story.

“Well…I don’t…I mean, he looked properly pissed,” Mei-Lin admitted.

“At who? Me? Sirius?”

“Maybe you, or maybe the both of you. I mean, I don’t know, Lily. You two were kind of glued to each other. It’s not like I could see who he was glaring at specifically.”

“He was glaring?” Lily shrieked.

The absolute prat, glaring at two innocent, unattached people. He’d had the opportunity to be the lips in question last night and callously tossed it aside. Who she chose to snog – Sirius, Remus, hell, Dumbledore! – was none of his concern, and certainly not worthy of his judgmental eyes.

Mei-Lin turned speculative. “Well, at first he just looked shocked. Like he’d stumbled in on Binns in a tutu, but then he got an expression that was more like that one-time Alvin Nieto fell off his broom. You know, when he shattered his femur, that look that was like one-half shock and one-half signal that he was going to vomit. After that passed, then, he looked like murder was very much an option.”

Lily had seriously underestimated how much James secretly despised her if seeing her kiss someone else was enough to make him physically ill. Unless…

“You don’t think he believes I kissed Sirius to punish him…do you?” Lily asked.

“He might,” Mei-Lin admitted reluctantly.

The trickle of water running in the loo alerted them that there was still another girl in the Tower. Lily swallowed back everything she wanted to say to her friends about James. Not that her words wouldn’t have been completely mangled anyway. She wasn’t sure how to face his accusations and poor opinion of her. As much as she hated him (and she did, she’d swear it to anyone who asked), she never wanted him to think so lowly of her.

Marlene emerged from the lav a few minutes later, still in her pajamas and looking haggard. Either the rumors of Lily’s night hadn’t reached her yet or simply weren’t that interesting in the face of a
hangover. Other than tightening her dressing gown a bit at the sight of Will in her bedroom, Marlene
paid them no heed. She crawled into her bed and pulled the coverings tight, exactly how Lily wished
she could retreat from the world herself.

Gone quiet with the stress of it all, Lily played the scene in her mind. Her imagination could summon
up details for everything: the way she’d lose balance on the first step, the scent of Sirius – the spice
of whiskey and smoke of cologne – and most of all, the way James’ eyes would bear down on the
both of them, condemning. Her imaginings were so vivid that Lily couldn’t be sure they weren’t
memories returned.

Sensing the dark place Lily had retreated, Mei-Lin and Will exchanged one of their inscrutable looks,
the kind that Lily could never decipher and hinted at the depths of their friendship.

There was no arguing that Lily was the core that held their small group of friends together. During
more than one heated argument, Will had made it clear that he wouldn’t so much as acknowledge
Mei-Lin in the halls, let alone deal with her petty complaints, if it weren’t for Lily.

After a particularly dark scene in fourth-year, Mei-Lin refused to speak in Will’s presence for a full
week until he, out of frustration, returned the treatment. Lily had wanted to pull her own hair out and
then theirs as well because all of their resentment stemmed from Will never bringing his own quill to
class. In every class they shared, Will would filch one off Mei-Lin, and then never return the bloody
thing. To Will, it was an argument over knuts. To Mei-Lin, it was an argument about respect.
Loudly, Will had vowed to wash his hands of Mei-Lin and her bitterness altogether, and yet the next
day at breakfast, one of the school owls had delivered a year’s supply of quills to Will at breakfast,
and he'd never asked to borrow one again. Despite what he said, he cared. They both did.

“Forget about Potter,” Will ordered. “You mean nothing to each other. Just two classmates. That’s
it.”

“Right,” Lily replied dully.

“Right. Instead, you’re going to focus on that brilliant maneuver you managed last night,” Will said.

“The one where I got black-out drunk and may have forgotten all sorts of information about the
target?”

“No, the one where you unearthed new information about the Grindylows and got in with one of our
primary suspects. That’s great work, Lily,” Will corrected.

Mei-Lin speedily cast a Muffiliato – the best remnant of their friendship with Severus – to drown out
their conversation from Marlene, who hadn’t stirred from behind her bed covers.

“It didn’t do any good. I don’t even remember what we talked about,” Lily pointed out glumly.

“Not yet, but it will. Hear me out. We faked our fight to give everyone a plausible reason to believe
you’d want to start hanging around the most popular kids in school, and now you’ve snogged Black
at the party of the month. Everyone, Black included, will believe it now. So, take it even further.
Take advantage of the opening.”

“What are you saying?” Lily said.

“I’m saying, put on something pretty and go talk to Black.”
History offered no shortage of pioneers in the field of journalism, men and women who had foregone the comfort of the known to delve undercover at great personal risk. They shucked their identities; disrobed, like their personhood was no more permanent than a pair of socks, and they became someone entirely new. True and total abandonment to the pursuit of truth.

There was Günter Wallraff, who’d only just been released from prison, tortured and beaten for protesting the junta in Greece. There was Marvel Cooke, the only African-American and the only female reporter at the Compass in New York City, who exposed the “Bronx Slave Market,” masquerading as a domestic worker to reveal how upper-class women would withhold pay and subject their employees to unconscionable abuse. There was Dorothy Lawrence, who traveled to the front lines as Private Denis Smith of the 1st Bn, Leicestershire Regiment and was detained as a spy when discovered.

And then there was Nellie Bly. Although Nellie (born Elizabeth Cochran Seaman) wasn’t English, Lily often felt an affinity toward her, a suspicion that under other circumstances, she might have walked the same path. Long before Frank Smith released his “groundbreaking” work on the conditions of asylums in 1935, Nellie Bly went undercover at Blackwell Island. Ten days she suffered the indignities of the institution in the name of truth and, once released, she led a successful campaign to reinvent the system: appropriating more funds, enacting stricter guidelines for healthcare practitioners, and introducing regulations to prevent overcrowding. Never content, Nellie had continued her undercover journalism, infiltrating New York jails, factories, and the state legislature to recount the corruption within. Upon retirement, she became an innovative businesswoman (all while offering unprecedented benefits to the people in her employ), developing the patent for a 44-gallon oil drum – the kind that was ubiquitous in Cokeworth. Nellie Bly, the unsung hero of the iron industry. And, as if that wasn’t enough, Nellie traveled the globe, not in 80 days but in 72, setting the world record for the trip.

Lily clung to the memory of Nellie Bly as she searched the castle for Sirius, clung to the enterprising minds that would absolve her of whatever lies she would tell that year. She had a passing idea of the places where the Marauders liked to hang out on the weekends from years spent trying to protect Sev from them. The ultimate irony was that she now put that knowledge to work in seeking out a Marauder and avoiding Severus entirely.

A betting man would place money on finding all four Marauders together, so Lily perked up when she saw Peter trying (and failing) to do a handstand in the east courtyard. Sure enough, he wasn’t alone. Remus was busy at his reading, chuckling over his book at his friends, and James was doing sit-ups. Shirtless. Because the universe hated her.

Sirius was conspicuously absent.

Steeling herself against the sight of tan skin and muscles gone taut with each alluring set, Lily walked over and greeted the three boys. Remus set his book down entirely when he saw her approach. There was no way James didn’t notice her hello, but he kept at his sit-ups, barely sparing her a glance.

“Do any of you know where Sirius is?” Lily asked. “I was hoping to talk to him.”

“I reckon he’s in the dormitory wishing he’d never been born, right about now,” James said.

A million scenarios darted through her mind, including one that was so appealing she couldn’t even articulate it. The terrible and forbidden idea that James might be jealous.

Remus took pity on her. “He’s hung over. Couldn’t get more than a groan out of him this morning, though Merlin knows I tried.”
“Right.” And like that, her foolish, love-struck hopes were dashed.

She ought to walk away, go hunt down Sirius like she’d intended. She nearly did as well, but Lily only made it a few steps before her conscience had her spinning around again, disturbing some kind of hidden conversation – one full of eyebrow raising and mouthed words – that the Marauders were having behind her.

“Actually James, I just wanted to talk to you for a second as well,” Lily said.

“Anything you have to say to me, you can say in front of my friends,” James said.

It was such a callback to how he’d refused to talk to her alone the day that she felt it like a slap in the face. Her relationship with James was, it appeared, to be a series of awkward encounters with an audience gaping on. Peter and Remus both openly stared at her.

Lily coughed discretely, and the boys snapped to attention. Suddenly fascinated by his reading, Remus ducked into his book once more, and Peter stared up at the sky like he’d spotted a dragon. James even had the decency to stop his workout, leaning back on his elbows so that his stomach stretched flat.

For a moment, Lily equivocated, stumbling over her words, but that had never been her way, and she quickly found her rhythm. “It occurred to me that you might think what happened between me and Sirius had something to do with you, like I was aiming to insult or punish you in some way by turning to your best mate. While I believe you’re the world’s worst prat and worthy of every kind of insult, I’m not that petty, and I wouldn’t go out of my way to hurt you. So just, what happened has nothing to do with you, and I hope you can believe that.

James heaved a dry laugh. “Merlin, we’ve gone to school together for how many years, Lily? I know you don’t go around snogging people for vengeance.”

It was the simplest approbation of her character, yet she wanted to collapse in relief all the same. The last week had proven that she didn’t have a clue what James truly thought of her, but, regardless, he didn’t believe the absolute worst.

“And,” James continued, “It’s not like you could fool any of us. You’re shite at scheming, Evans. You couldn’t hope to trick a first-year, let alone me.”

She should start collecting bets on that. She might end the year a wealthy woman.

“Right, well, we’re agreed then. What happened between me and Sirius has nothing to do with you. Brilliant.”

James didn’t say anything, just settled on his back and resumed his workout. All the self-control in the world wasn’t enough to stop Lily from scraping her eyes lovingly down his bare torso. His nipples were the same tawny brown of his eyes. Quidditch was too kind to James Potter, and life was too cruel to her.

If she was not mistaken, Peter snickered.

“Alright then, I’ll see you later,” Lily said cheerily. The situation had turned surprisingly bright.

“Glad you’re having fun like you wanted,” James called after her.

Happy and oblivious, Lily just shouted back, “Thanks!”
Sirius opened the door. A toothbrush hung loosely from the side of his mouth, a stain of paste clung to his lip. Despite everything, he looked handsome: a perfectly square-face, defined jaw, intense eyes only highlighted by his heavy, low-hanging brows. A face to make a girl swoon. And, if last night was evidence, she was no different.

The supreme irony of Sirius Black was that even as his face lured people toward him, his demeanor and attitude screamed for them to back away. He was like a reluctant siren. Just out of bed with his hair unbrushed and his feet bare, he was looking particularly unwelcoming. The glare didn’t help either.

Brightly, Lily held up her gift. “I heard you weren’t feeling that great, so I brought you some Pepper-Up. Told Pomfrey that one of the first-years was feeling sick this morning.”

It was the right move. Sirius leaned to the side so that he was no longer blocking the door, gesturing for her to enter. He uncorked the potion with his teeth and took a long, greedy swig while Lily’s eyes scraped the room for clues.

There were none. The room was meticulously clean, at odds with everything she would have assumed about the Gryffindor boys or simply boys in general. No clothes on the floor. Beds made. Zonko’s merchandise tucked away out of sight in their trunks. In comparison, Lily and her dormmates were animals.

“This room is so clean!” Lily said.

“Oh, that’s me. Bit of a neat freak. The boys keep it as clean as they can for my sake, and then I do the rest,” Sirius said. His voice was hoarse from a night spent screaming over the blare of a party.

The Pepper-Up did its work and some color returned to his wan face. Not that he sat still for Lily to study its progress. Sirius went straight to his trunk and drank from a hidden flask.

With a wet smack of his lips, Sirius said, “Now there’s the combination I needed.”

Lily swallowed back her disapproval. “I was hoping to talk to you.”

“Of course, you were. What is it the muggles do?” Sirius performed a rough imitation of the sign of the cross. Rough in that he mixed up the directions for the ‘holy spirit’ part. But the gist came across just fine. ‘There. You’re absolved. I absolve you. Go forth without guilt.’

Finished, Sirius went into the loo to return his toothbrush. Lily stood still in astonishment, blinking. Until it clicked…

“That’s so patronizing!” Lily shouted. “I didn’t come here for you to tell me I did nothing wrong. I know I did nothing wrong!”

Sirius’s head popped out from behind the door, wary either because she was yelling or because he suspected a trap. “Then, why are you here?”

Limited experience in seduction aside, Lily was fairly sure that screeching at boys was not alluring, so she did her best to school her temper. She widened her eyes into an expression that she hoped looked beseeching and feminine. When Sirius reeled back in alarm, Lily figured she’d probably failed.

“I wanted to talk to you because last night was fun,” Lily said. “And that’s what I’m lacking in my
life right now. Fun, that is.”

“Happy to help,” Sirius said, the line smooth but his delivery decidedly not. Something like fear had raised his voice an octave.

“I was hoping that we might see each other again,” Lily said.

This time she sidled forward, closer. She placed a hand on his arm, milky white and delicate against the fabric of his sleeve. Her intentions were clear. Inscrutable yet focused, Sirius looked at where her fingers caressed him. Was it a look of disgust? Outrage? Or that male awareness that Marlene spoke of with such confidence and that Lily had never before sensed?

“Next time there’s a party, we could hang out again,” Sirius coughed out.

“I don’t want to wait.”

“Two days ago, it was Prongs,” Sirius pointed out. “I’m not keen on being anyone’s second choice.”

“Neither do I. I don’t like people who don’t like me. I don’t like people who reject me,” Lily said with more confidence on the James matter than she truly felt. “Do you like me?”

Time passed. Too much time. Lily sensed that Sirius was undergoing some kind of internal battle, neither rejecting nor accepting her advances, caught in a debate that she couldn’t guess at.

There’d been none of this second-guessing with Andy, the only bloke in the whole world who could claim the title of “Lily-Evans’-ex-boyfriend.” Since third-year, Lily had harbored a favorable opinion of Andy, always mannerly at the dinner table, never one to play favorites as a prefect, and, best of all, he’d once deducted points from James for bullying Severus. None of the other prefects ever bothered policing James’ behavior, except for her. They adored it, occasionally awarding him house points for it!

Outside on the grounds to appreciate the sun on a fresh day in late April of her fifth-year, where the campus burned with all the energy repressed during the dark winter months, Lily had studied Andy, who sat only a few meters away with his mates. A gust of wind had torn through the grounds, tossing students’ term papers into disarray. Andy’s long and shaggy blonde hair had lifted with the breeze, blown back like he was posing for the cover of one of her mum’s raunchy paperbacks, and Lily had been hooked. It was one of those time-stands-still moments of pulsing attraction.

Armed with nothing but her desire, Lily had marched over and asked him out before all of his friends, no consideration for the fact that he might reject her, that he would be leaving Hogwarts forever in only three months alongside all the other seventh-years. Her gamble was promptly rewarded as Andy had agreed to meet her for dinner that very night. Dating was nothing but a simple game of ask and receive.

But if Sirius needed a push, she could give him one.

“From every angle I look at it, I think we make a good match,” Lily said plainly. “I’m fiercely independent, and you have your own life, so neither one of us is going to cling to the other or interfere. We have fun when we’re together. You can’t deny that. I’ve not always liked you per se, but we’ve known each other for years, and there’s always been some degree of connection. Don’t you think? And –” here, Lily sucked in a breath, bit her bottom lip, “–I’ve always had a thing for guys with long hair. I think you’re…well, I suppose, I’m attracted to you.”

“So, you want me to play your boyfriend?”
Lily considered. “I want to go on a date, and if that goes well, then, yes, partially. I want you to be my boyfriend.”

The way she’d laid it out, it all sounded very logical, even though it was anything but. Realistically, they’d make a terrible match. Her idea of fun would bore him to tears, and his struck her as crude. They shared virtually nothing in common and couldn’t even be counted on to make each other laugh. The very real physical attraction she felt toward him could only carry them so far.

Sirius took her by surprise when he followed up with a question. “Do you consider yourself a forgiving person?”

“I’m sorry?”

“I mean, if someone did something wrong, but they were truly sorry for it and never did anything like it again, would you be able to forgive them? Or, would you say that everything’s fine, but secretly think less of them for it forever? You know, like a liar,” Sirius said.

The conversation had taken a strange turn, and Sirius peered down at her with such intensity that Lily began to fidget. The comment about liars struck her particularly hard, and she wondered whether he didn’t see right through her pretensions at wanting to date to the real truth of the matter.

“Well, I suppose it depends,” Lily said. “I mean, I never forgave Severus for calling me a ‘mudblood.’”

Sirius waved his hand dismissively. “No, no, no. Nothing like that. Snape’s a bleeding prick and always has been. I’m talking about someone making a single mistake and then never repeating it. Would you be forgiving or hold it against them?”

“Do you consider yourself a forgiving person?” Lily hedged.

“No. I’ve never forgiven anyone. Not my mother, my brother, my cousins. Certainly not my dearly beloved father. But this isn’t about me. I’m asking you,” Sirius said.

It was almost like a continuation of their game the night before. There were several factors that would influence her ability to forgive, but Jinx the Sphinx didn’t allow for clarifying questions. She had to answer with her gut.

“Yes. Yes, I’d forgive.”

Sirius closed his eyes, and the sound of their breathing dominated the room. Those four words shouldn’t have been so emotionally taxing, but they left the both of them drained. She was standing on the precipice of something, and she was terrified to look down and see what lay beyond.

“You’re a dangerous woman, Evans,” Sirius muttered. “Fuck it. What’s the harm in one date. Let’s go.”

“What?”

Lily was unprepared for such a sudden decision and even less prepared for a date. In the hypothetical scenarios she’d run in her head, he’d accept and agree to take her to Hogsmeade some weekend or to meet for a walk around the castle on a Sunday afternoon. Never had she considered the decisiveness with which Sirius Black led his life.

“You want a date, we’ll have a date. I’m not in the habit of disappointing pretty girls,” Sirius said.
Newly jovial, he was already preparing to leave. Sirius tied his shoes, while Lily looked on in amazement. He measured out the laces evenly and then looped wide and tight, taking longer than anyone ought on the task.

“It’s nearly dinner. Are we going to the Great Hall?” Lily questioned, scrambling to follow Sirius out the door. Somehow, she’d lost control of the situation, and she couldn’t manage how it had happened.

He all but shouted a refusal. “Sorry, I just…with everyone looking at us, we won’t be able to focus. No, I’ll get us dinner, but not in the Great Hall.”

Merely along for the ride, Lily let him set the pace, which happened to be a long-legged race to the portrait hole. She’d have thought he was fleeing a crime scene had she not known better. At the landing of the stairs, Will and Mei-Lin were engaged in a game of chess, a coverup for their spying. Lily shot them a celebratory grin as she whisked past.

There was a landing of marbled flooring where the two staircases – boys and girls – intersected. It was the busiest place in the common room as foot traffic doubled in the limited space. Paying her surroundings little mind, Lily nearly collided with Mary on her way down from the girls’ stairwell. Mary adroitly dodged Lily’s swinging arms and gestured for Lily to go first. The mannerly gesture hit Lily like a punch. Up until that moment, she’d entirely forgotten about Mary MacDonald and the tempestuous role she played in Sirius’s life.

It was too much to hope that Mary hadn’t heard about the party, and pointless besides, considering new rumors would be circulating by the end of the week. Thankfully, Mary didn’t lash out or make any overtly hostile remarks. Like James had pronounced earlier that week, Mary MacDonald was unflappable.

The reminder of Mary was enough to dim Lily’s spirits all the same. It was with a heightened sense of awkwardness that Lily hurried to the portrait hole, mortifyingly conscious of Mary’s footsteps behind her. Lily thought Sirius was equally aware of his (ex?)-girlfriend. Likely to irritate Mary, he offered Lily his hand and tugged her through the portrait hole with an arm around her waist, the most graceful exit she’d ever made and an act of gallantry that contradicted everything she knew to be true about her housemate.

Despite claiming to want to avoid the Great Hall, Sirius led her in that exact direction. When Lily pointed this out, Sirius grew coy, promising her that he was about to dazzle with the reveal of one of Hogwarts’ best kept secrets. The promise of discovery, of course, sent Lily into a dizzying spell of excitement. She fantasized that an unguarded and besotted Sirius might expose the Grindylows to her within a matter of days.

When they neared the Great Hall, Sirius steered her down the stairs instead toward the Hufflepuff dormitory and the basements. The castle was prone to wild temperature swings during the change of the season as the magic struggled to regulate the mercurial weather, and the basements were uncommonly cold. The upstairs was heated by the sunny spring air pouring through open windows, but none of it reached the stuffy basements. Her thin-strapped top left her exposed. Damn the cost of seduction.

Sirius drew to a sudden stop in the middle of the corridor before the still-life of a bowl of fruit. The painting had always called attention if only because it was far tamer than its peers, not just in content but in style. It looked like something out of a textbook on painting for beginners, the kind of painting your aunt might produce during one of her summer courses and gift to the family with far more pride than was strictly earned.
With an air of pure self-satisfaction, Sirius told Lily, “Tickle the pair.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Lily huffed in indignation. No, more than indignation. She was mortally offended.

Sirius grew even more pleased. “I promise you, this isn’t a prank, Lily. Tickle the pear. You’ll be amazed what happens.”

“What, like a doorknob will appear, which opens to the kitchens?” Lily asked, giving the pear a little tickle as she spoke. Sirius looked shocked. “Come on, Sirius. You wound me. You seriously thought I wouldn’t know where the school kitchens are?”

The arrogance and isolation of the Marauders was such that Sirius truly believed that the most curious student of their year wouldn’t know where her food was prepared. An ill-received article on house elves had been her very first piece for the school paper. During her first year at Hogwarts, Lily had operated under the mistaken assumption that custodial tasks were dealt with by a flick of casual wandwork. The delineation between what was easily achievable via magic and what would require manual labor, so easy to spot for her pureblood classmates, was incomprehensible to Lily and other muggleborns at the school. Like many others, she’d thought that Dumbledore cast a laundry spell on her clothes each night.

But then she’d read about the Principal Exemptions to Gamp’s Law of Elemental Transfiguration, which outlined the immunity of foodstuffs to magic. There was no way someone waved a wand and produced the bangers and mash she scarfed down for breakfast. A mystery was afoot.

That was how she’d discovered the kitchens. Lily had cycled through half her professors, piecing together a shoddy understanding of how chores at the castle were accomplished, and finally, Flitwick had taken pity on her and hinted that the kitchens were hidden beneath the Great Hall. For weeks, she’d devoted every waking minute away from classes to combing this very corridor for clues, her only company Mei-Lin and Severus, who both thought she was mad but kept their opinions wisely to themselves. Her fingers combed every centimeter of the still-life fruit bowl a hundred times – poking, prodding, scratching at the peeling paint. And finally, she’d tickled the pear.

Opening the door on the kitchens had felt like escaping through the wardrobe to Narnia then, and nothing had changed since. One moment she was in the quiet chill of the basements, and the next, she’d entered a bustling world of industry and light. With fires and ovens pumping over-time, the kitchens were warm and lit with a comforting orange glow. Every elf was engaged in their respective task, balancing on shaky stools to fetch pots from the top shelf or whisking eggs with the ferocity of a tornado. And, in spite of all the chaos, one of the elves still found the time to rush over and ask how she could serve them.

“Oh, don’t bother yourself. We can put something together ourselves,” Lily rushed to assure the elf.

Her past experiences with elves should have prepared her that such kindness would be ill-received. It was hard to tell who appeared more askance: Sirius or the elf. The elf, for her part, looked imploringly to Sirius for help; her ugly face, flat-nosed and flat-eared was doubly wretched from her desperation.

“Let the dear make you something to eat,” Sirius said, earning a beaming smile from the elf.

Lily was uncomfortable. It was the same feeling she felt when she went to a restaurant and had a waiter serve her, an awareness that she was no one special to deserve someone else’s effort. Rationalizing, Lily acknowledged that the elves served her and hundreds of others every day without so much as a nod of gratitude, and she never lost a wink of sleep over it. It would be kinder, really, to
give this elf a moment to bask in praise and appreciation for once.

“I guess so long as we keep it simple,” Lily capitulated. “I wouldn’t want you to not get dinner finished for everyone else. A cheese toastie?”

“Grill it with the truffle butter,” Sirius added after a beleaguered sigh, like he couldn’t believe her antics.

Rich people.

To the elf, who proudly produced herself as Annabelle after taking their orders, Lily asked, “Do you mind if I bake something while you make our food? I’ll stay out of your way.”

Now that she’d been set to work, Annabelle didn’t mind indulging Lily. In fact, she buzzed with enthusiasm at the prospect. Annabelle rushed off to fetch Lily an apron, a comically tiny strip of fabric designed for elfish proportions with barely enough string to tie a knot around her human-sized waist. Then, Annabelle set them up in a corner of the kitchen with clean counter space beneath a formidably stocked spice rack.

“And why are we baking exactly?” Sirius questioned.

“Because I’m good at it, and you’re going to appreciate just how good, when you get to eat it,” Lily said smugly. She flicked him in the nose – their first physical contact since the portrait hole – and Sirius chuckled.

Inspecting the pantry for ingredients was a hassle as she had to tower over half a dozen elves all scrambling to and fro. Three different elves crashed into her waist, bent over their own work and not anticipating a witch in their midst. Each collision came with a soliloquy of apologies that powered past Lily’s promises that no offense was taken. The cupboard held a wondrous array of ingredients. Like many things in the wizarding world, it was larger on the inside than it seemed. Lily breathed deep the competing aromas.

She returned to Sirius laden down with ingredients. He sat on a low stool while she mixed together flour, sea salt, and almonds in a white bowl. They talked about classes and their professors, their conversation as light as a vanilla cupcake, which was not on the menu for their evening. Several times, Sirius startled her with an opinion of one of their professors. His indictment of Professor Sprout was so intense that Lily almost punctured a thumb-sized hole into the dough she was folding into a tart pan.

“Sprout?” Lily demanded in shock. “She’s the most innocuous woman alive. How can you hate Professor Sprout?”

“I have my reasons,” Sirius said神秘地.

Lily was having none of it. “No, tell me, or you won’t get to try my tart! I’ll eat it all myself!”

“I have pretty high culinary standards, so…” Sirius stopped to look at her appraisingly. “Also, I’m not sure I believe you could eat that whole thing yourself.” Neither could she, which was why it was fortunate that he relented under her stern glare. “Fine, fine, fine. Her first year here, we had a few run-ins, but nothing too bad. Honestly, we ought to have been in the honeymoon phase, where she thinks we’re more charm than trouble, far longer, but for some reason she just didn’t like me from day one.”

“Inconceivable.”
“I know. It all came to a head when we were in the greenhouse, and she said that since we were such a good class, she’d show us some sprouts form the devil’s snare plant.”

Understanding dawned. Lily remembered that day.

Sirius saw the recognition on her face and nodded. “So, you know how it goes. Pete manages to get his thick neck stuck in it, and it starts strangling the life out of him. He turns bright purple before anyone notices, gurgling away in the back of the class, and everyone panicking until your mate, Mei-Lin, remembers to cast an *Incendio*. Peter goes to the Hospital Wing for second-degree burns, and I get a detention.”

“You’re cross because Sprout gave you a detention after pushing your own mate into a deadly plant and nearly killing him?” Lily said slowly.

“Aha! But I didn’t push him. Complete accident, and she wouldn’t believe me,” Sirius crowed, triumphant like he’d caught her out at something.

“I wonder why. You can’t deny it reeks of something you’d do,” Lily pointed out.

“Reckless endangerment of myself and others? Absolutely. Still, Sprout should have believed me when I said I was innocent.”

“You weren’t lying when you said you didn’t forgive,” Lily said.

Sirius smiled at her darkly.

Annabelle returned with their cheese toasties. Savage in his enthusiasm, Sirius attacked his sandwich. He gave a thumbs up, to which Annabelle clapped in delight. Busy stirring her milk and lemon zest mixture over a low flame, Lily could only look at her cheese toastie longingly. Obligingly, Sirius tore off a piece and popped it into her open mouth, butter smearing along her lower lip.

“Dammit, you were right,” Lily groaned. “The truffle butter really does make all the difference.”

“I’m an expert on matters of taste. What, you thought I was just spoiled?”

Lily, seeing no point in lying, shrugged, “You do have an air of entitlement, yes.”

He tried to suppress it, but Sirius used the word ‘jolly’ far more liberally than any working-class bloke. He loudly denounced polyester and other synthetic fabrics. Perhaps most damningly, he never sent his own mail, paying a first-year to take his missives (and God only knew who he could be writing) to the owlery.

A fissure of vicious glee ran through her as she recounted these many upper-class sins. Reminders of his upper-crust upbringing never played well with Sirius, but Lily didn’t care. Mockery of the wealthy was all she and the rest of the lower classes had to sustain them. It was a national sport. She’d be forgiven – by the world, if not Sirius – for chasing her jollies.

Scowling, Sirius said, “I don’t avoid the mail because I’m spoiled. I avoid handling my mail because I’m allergic to feathers.”

“Feathers?”

“Feathers.”

“You poor thing!” Lily practically wailed.
All those mornings where the owls came swooping in en masse! Feathers littered the table, dropped onto students’ porridge. Owls hopped about indiscriminately. He’d been in agony for years with her never the wiser.

“I get hives on my hands, and they fade fast enough, don’t itch terribly. It’s the aesthetic more than anything,” Sirius said.

Lily smiled widely. “Now I’m picturing you with bloated meat hands. Any other charming bodily ills to look forward to?”

“My left knee cracks like an apparition if I keep it bent too long. I stand up from bed, and it wakes Remus from a dead sleep it’s so loud,” Sirius said.

“Knees like an old man’s,” Lily teased.

“Actually, I shattered it when I was twelve.” Sirius paused for a long moment. “I fell.”

Time slipped by. They’d been talking for more than an hour, the toasties nothing but crumbs clinging to the crevices of their plates or caught in the folds of their robes. Lily finished coating her tart with apricot preserves, just a light dusting for flavor, and then she was done with her masterpiece.

She’d completed a perfect plum shortbread tart. Delicately sliced plums spiraled over layers of fluffy dough. Just the sight of it made her mouth water, and she sliced off a sizeable piece for them both to share. Sirius didn’t say a word for several minutes after he took his first bite. His fork hovered above the plate, like he couldn’t wait for his next mouthful, and his eyes were fixed closed in rapture.

“Where did you learn to cook like this?”

Lily didn’t reply with the truth, which was that she was likely the worst cook currently residing in Scotland. Her every foray into preparing a meal had been a forced affair ending in over-salted creations, which convinced everyone Lily was best kept away from dinner in the future. What she could do was bake – butterfly cakes and rock tarts, sponge cakes and scones, maid of honors and a dozen different varieties of tarts that melted on the tongue, none more savory than the butter tart, which required three whole sticks of butter to produce a single batch.

After her mother died, the neighbors had dropped off enough puddings that Lily had thought they’d be fed for a lifetime. They lasted a month. Then, the onus was placed on Petunia to prepare three meals a day to keep the family healthy and living. Breakfast could be kept simple with toast, and a hastily prepped bologna sandwich and an apple in a paper bag were enough to get Lily through the school day. Dinner, on the other hand, required effort.

At first, Lily and Petunia had tried to survive on the frozen meals that the market was starting to sell, cramming them into the icebox until it was fit to burst, but their budget was limited, and soon Petunia was stocking the pantry with less-easily prepared meals. Petunia’s first forays into cooking dinner were disasters – her roasts were burnt, her potatoes bland, her puddings misshapen – and every meal ended with Petunia dissolving into bereaved sobs as Lily refused to finish what was on her plate.

Time and effort had improved Petunia’s proficiency in the kitchen, but she steadfastly refused to bake, refused to spend so much as a quid of her grocery budget on an ice cream cone from the store because as Petunia always said, ‘It’ll all just go to your hips, Lily, and then no man will want us, and we’ll be stuck here forever.’ Infuriating words to hear from a twelve-year-old. So it was that Lily was left with no alternative but to learn to bake, lest she risk never basking in the glories of sugar again.

“You know my mum died before I started here. I took over the baking after that. My grandmum
doesn’t live too far away from us, so I was able to visit sometimes, and she’d teach me how to make
different things if I asked nicely,” Lily said.

“And did you? Ask nicely?” Sirius wondered with far more skepticism than Lily appreciated.

“I can be sweet! Every bit as sweet as that pastry,” Lily declared. As if to test her words, Sirius
brought the tart to his lips and took a lingering bite.

Around a mouthful of crumbs, Sirius said, “If your grandmother taught you to cook like this, she
must be a queen among women. Like one of those jolly, old grandmothers from the fairytales.”

Truthfully, Lily’s grandmother – Ida Evans – couldn’t have diverged more from the fairytale
grandmums with their chubby hands and cheeks red and plump like apples. Ida Evans was a
shriveled mite of a woman with skin leathered and brown as a horse’s bridle. On the palimpsest of
wrinkles that was her face, her eyes practically disappeared. All her life, Lily had heard kids her age
worry over the day when their grandparents would die. Lily had never suffered that fear. Not out of
any disloyalty to Ida, but out of her long-held, childhood belief that her grandmother had never been
fully alive to begin with. Lily took one look at her grandmother and thought: decay.

For a brief period, Lily was convinced that her grandmother was, in fact, a vampire. In the back of
her maths notebook, she’d compiled the evidence, and it looked compelling. To start, she’d never
seen her grandmother standing out in the sun. To be fair, she’d never seen her grandmother out at
night either. The outside world held no appeal to Ida, who preferred toddling around her house, an
English Magpie with a dilapidated exterior but perfectly neat inside, filled to the brim with curio
cabinets and enough bric-a-brac to keep Lily entertained for hours. It was always dimly lit as Ida kept
the drapes tightly shut to ward off the spies she suspected loitered in her overgrown bushes, and she
would only bear a single lamp in each room. (When presented with her granddaughters’ bruised
knees, battered from walking into end tables in the dark, Ida had insisted that light made no
difference, which was entirely true for Ida as she’d been legally blind for nearly twenty years.) There
were no mirrors outside the loo to determine whether Ida had a reflection. If Ida head ever been vain,
she’d abandoned such luxuries long before Lily’s birth. The scent of roses – wafting from candles,
crushes petals in the tub, and Ida’s perfume – overwhelmed and suffocated the house, almost like Ida
was trying to hide something. The stench of something rotting, perhaps? Most damningly, Lily
couldn’t be sure whether she’d ever seen her grandmother take so much as a bite of food. Every
mealtime, she pottered around the table, heaping unwanted seconds and thirds upon her family’s
plates and only picking at her own food if someone – usually Petunia – urged her to take a seat and
think of herself.

Rather than frightened at the prospect that her grandmother might have fangs and quench her thirst
on the blood of the innocent each night, Lily had been fascinated. After all, Ida had never shown an
interest in murdering Lily herself and unveiling a vampire would be a grand discovery. Enough to
get her name into the history books for sure.

Time had ultimately dashed Lily’s suspicions because vampires were supposed to stay the same,
physically speaking, for all eternity, and there was no denying the changes in Ida. Not that she
appeared to age. Ida was an inviolable, fixed being, as old at sixty as she’d be at eighty or ninety or
one hundred and three were she to live that long. No, it was her height that gave her away. For every
centimeter that Lily grew, Ida appeared to shrink the equivalent. The ever-present force of gravity
was bending her spine into the shape of a comma until, one day, Lily looked down and realized the
crown of Ida’s head barely reached her ribs. It was for the best that Lily’s growth spurt seemed to be
slowing because if they’d continued at the same rate for much longer, Ida would have been left no
taller than a pixie.
Sirius drank up Lily’s descriptions of Ida. Everyone knew that his relations with his family were a mess. His parents had chucked him from the house last year, and his father had died only a few months later. Rumor had it that Sirius didn’t even attend the funeral. After the snub, his strained relationship with his brother had deteriorated to the point of nothing. In comparison, Lily’s idyllic tales of a batty but loving grandmother were novel, like something out of a dream.

Her family life was far far far from perfect, but Lily didn’t correct him. It would have been cruel.

From over his long empty plate, Sirius watched her. He had an intensity, something in his eyes that made her self-aware. Not self-conscious exactly. More than she found herself projecting, imagining what he saw when he looked at her, what he thought. The puzzle had all of her attention, and still she couldn’t make headway on it.

“What are we doing, Lily?” Sirius asked quietly. Unexpectedly.

Lily swallowed, licked a few stray crumbs from her lips. Earlier, she’d thought the big decision had been made. She as going to mislead him, date him, in the name of her story. But this wasn’t a decision she was going to make once and then live with. The situation would require that she make the same decision every day, reaffirm her commitment, lie.

“We’re getting to know each other,” Lily said, true enough that she could get the words out with a smile. Sirius reached out and folded her hand with his.

Lily could only hope that making the decision would grow easier with time. Instinct promised it would not.

Chapter End Notes

So, I’m giving you this chapter now because I feel horribly guilty because of the no-James / Sirius/Lily pairing up torture that I’m inflicting on all of you. I don’t want to test your patience by making you wait months and months for things to start looking up. The Sirius/Lily part is an essential component of the story’s plot/conflict. That said, while this story is obviously not canon-compliant (hello, what are the Grindylows), the characters are going to end the story in the necessary positions so that all canon events (marriages…babies…deaths…) may take place, so if you ever start getting depressed, just remember that soulmates will find each other.
All Dorcas Meadowes wanted was an internship at the Ministry of Magic over the summer that was fast approaching. Once the internship was procured, she could make the necessary connections to transform it into a full-time junior assistant position for after her time at Hogwarts had ended. Her sensibilities dictated that all positions ought to be earned through sheer force of intellect, so the need for connections rankled, but more Ministers of Magic had come from Slytherin than any other house, and she wasn’t stupid. There was a way things were done.

Joining the newspaper in her third year had been a stepping stone on her journey, a way to pad her CV and gain a portfolio of her writing. The friends she’d made along the way were fine and all, but they weren’t the purpose. And just then, she was strongly considering murdering each one of them and starting afresh as they recklessly endangered the paper’s very integrity. They were so very Gryffindor (even the Hufflepuff).

Lily knew Dorcas was strongly considering a massacre because their editor had just growled it to the table, and there was a madness in her tone that lent it the quality of a real threat.

The newspaper club had reconvened in their abandoned Runes-classroom-turned-office for a Sunday evening debrief. Naturally, Dorcas had been eager to hear any developments on the Grindylows story. She had not reacted well to the news.

“This is such a blatant violation of journalistic ethics, Lily Evans!” Dorcas said.

Once at the train station, Lily had met Dorcas’s mother, Pauline, who’d looked far too young and fashionable to be a mum. Pauline had worn a drapey shirt that entirely concealed the existence of her breasts, pants that hung loose and were made of the softest looking silk imaginable, a bulky scarf that stretched past her knees, and a headdress to top it all off. Every piece was a different shade of lavender to offset her dark sin. Lily had stared open mouthed as Pauline shepherded her daughter and her mountain of belongings onto the Hogwarts Express, firmly directing the porters with the luggage, yet never losing her general amiability. She was gracious and kind and straight off the cover of *Vogue*, until Dorcas spit out her gum on the platform. Then, Pauline had intoned “Dorcas Meadowes” in the sternest voice imaginable, and Lily had marveled at how the resemblance to McGonagall hadn’t been clear before.

So, when Dorcas said Lily’s full name, stretched out like that, Lily knew she was in very big trouble. Dorcas couldn’t compete with her mother when it came to fashion, but she could match her look for look in the authority department.

“Maybe, but it’s also inspired!” Lily declared.

Lily had woken up joyous that morning, like it was her wedding day. Rather than chase breadcrumbs across the castle, never learning anything significant, she was taking real action in narrowing in on the Grindylows. She was following in the intrepid footsteps of admired reports. She was making Hogwarts history! It was amazing that birds hadn’t collected around to help her dress, her cheerfulness matching that of a Disney princess.

All day, as Lily worked on her assignments and raced to her various clubs, she’d ridden the cloud of her victory. No one had referenced her relationship with Sirius, so she hadn’t been forced to confront
outside opinion until now. Dorcas could pitch any kind of fit she liked – throw an inkwell at Lily’s head, upend the chairs, light the bloody place on fire – Lily was not giving up her victory high.

“You’re going to get the paper shut down,” Dorcas hissed.

“None of the professors have ever paid any attention to the articles we write, let alone how we go about writing them,” Lily said.

“Except that one time, when Will trashed Professor Bukhari. That got some attention,” Mei-Lin said evenly.

“He held every class back by ten minutes! Every class! What was I supposed to do? Have my whole schedule thrown off because of one numbers-obsessed professor?” Will demanded.

Dorcas did not let the segue temper her anger for a second. In fact, it seemed to increase her ire that no one was taking her seriously, and her dark cheeks grew ruddy as she fought back her frustration. Lily wanted to pat her hand in a sign of commiseration as she understood how insufferable her mates could be, but recognized that would not have the desired effect, and instead stayed fully seated and stared at her knuckles, like the lines that bisected them were endlessly fascinating.

“I forbid you to date Sirius Black,” Dorcas said.

When Lily didn’t stop staring at her knuckles, Dorcas reached across the trunk that served as their meeting table and clamped a hand over Lily’s own, forcing Lily to acknowledge her. Trapped, Lily gave Dorcas her full attention and moved into her spiel on Nellie Bly and other great examples of investigative journalism throughout history. Undercover work was a practice that plucked Pulitzers from the sky and brought honor to the publications with the bravery to send their journalists undercover; it wasn’t unethical.

“I’m with Lily on this,” Will volunteered, as if his loyalty had ever been called into question. “My mum’s done undercover stuff for The Times, The Sunday Telegraph, The Daily Prophet. It’s like she always says, ‘Sometimes, you have to come at a story sideways.’”

“Yes. Undercover work was a practice that plucked Pulitzers from the sky and brought honor to the publications with the bravery to send their journalists undercover; it wasn’t unethical.

“I’m with Lily on this,” Will volunteered, as if his loyalty had ever been called into question. “My mum’s done undercover stuff for The Times, The Sunday Telegraph, The Daily Prophet. It’s like she always says, ‘Sometimes, you have to come at a story sideways.’”

“Has you mum ever dated anyone she was investigating, during the investigation?” Dorcas challenged.

“Well, no.”

“There you have it. It’s–”

“But if she had dated anyone, I would have supported her because my mum was single and lonely for a long time, and she deserved to find some happiness. And I for one, am not one of those weak types with an Oedipal complex, who goes ballistic at the thought of his mum having a shag. I support her!” Will said.

Lily appreciated that Will was trying to back her up, truly she did, but she wasn’t sure what to do with this oversharing, and neither, it seemed, did anyone else. At least it gave Mei-Lin a laugh, and she didn’t quail before the unimpressed glare of their editor. Lily decided it was best she fight for herself.

“There’s a difference between putting yourself in a situation under false pretenses, like getting admitted to a psychiatric institution and exploiting someone else’s feelings,” Dorcas reprimanded.

“Come on,” Lily said, rolling her eyes. “It’s not like Sirius has actual feelings for me. He’s Sirius! Besides, I can’t jerk him around anymore than Mary does. Fake dating me is going to be like a
holiday for him!”

“You don’t think, when this is all over, he’s going to be hurt when he finds out you were only pretending to have feelings for him?” Dorcas said.

Dorcas knew just where to prod to make Lily’s happy balloon deflate, but Lily wanted to cling to her high a little longer.

Moodily, Lily said, “How do you know I don’t have feelings for him?”

“Please. As if you’re not still completely lost over Potter,” Dorcas laughed.

Squawking, Lily fell over herself to protest this very untrue statement. Like she’d told Sirius the night before, she did not like boys who did not like her back! That was just masochism, self-defeatism at the very least! Her mates ought to have the basic decency to nod in agreement, but they all listened to her rant in silence. The only sound came from Mei-Lin’s bracelets, hidden beneath her oversized sweater and clanging together brassily with each shake of her wrist. Somehow, this clanging sounded like laughter; the bracelets were laughing at the idea she wasn’t in love with James Potter. Berks, the lot of them, bracelets and mates.

“Just admit defeat, luv,” Will suggested. “Lily’s all in on this one. Besides, it’d hardly be better for her to go chuck him one day in. There’s no way he’d let that go without an explanation, and then where’d we be?”

“I still don’t like it,” Dorcas said. Reluctantly, however, Dorcas allowed the meeting to progress to other paper business.

The end of the month was upon them, which meant they’d be distributing the March issue that week. As Lily contributed the least in terms of submissions, the responsibility for playing papergirl typically fell to her. She’d lurk outside the Dining Hall during meal times, begging or coercing passerby to part with their knuts, surprise unsuspecting first-years in the loo, and urge the professors to buy a few extra for their loved ones. When the end of the month coincided with a Hogsmeade weekend, Lily would bring an extra stack in her satchel to sell to the townsfolk. She could usually count on Aberforth at the Hog’s Head to buy at least four copies.

Meanwhile, the new month also brought new assignments for Will and Mei-Lin. While the three of them worked out the details, Lily wondered whether she could transfigure her stable, four-legged chair into one with wheels, like they had in muggle offices, so she could spin about in circles while they chatted. She suspected it was beyond her skill level, but she scoured her Transfiguration text for clues anyway. James wouldn’t have needed to look. He’d have just waved his wand and gone mad with 360-degree spins, until he grew too dizzy to continue. Lily hated him.

Lily tuned back into the conversation in time to hear the final assignments. To Will had been issued the challenge of interviewing Binns about the anniversary of his death. Getting Binns to corporealize enough for a conversation was impossible, but if anyone had the charm, it was Will. Mei-Lin, on the other hand, had been tasked with an experiment. She’d play a couple popular muggle sports and then, conclude which had burnt the most calories. There were several holes in the methodology that would make the experiment entirely unscientific – hello, an amateur swimmer was hardly going to burn the same calories as a hobbyist! – but Lily kept the complaint to herself. The sort that read the sports section would only care for pop science anyway.

The meeting was over, so everyone began packing up their things. Lily had nothing to carry besides her Transfiguration textbook, so she stood up and cracked her back, waiting for the others to finish their scramble to reassemble parchment and wands and robes. Dorcas took excessively long, and
since she was heading in the opposite direction of the Ravenclaw dormitories anyway, Lily made to exit without a thought of waiting for her. A call of her full name, again, stopped her.

“Lily Evans! One last thing. Don’t, and I mean don’t, under any circumstances, have sex with him!” Dorcas said.

Lily promptly dropped her Transfiguration text on the floor and screamed, “Ewwwwwwwww!”

It wasn’t the typical female response to the prospect of a shag with Sirius Black. But then again, nothing about this situation was typical. Adventures never were.

Lily jogged down the Grand Staircase, skipping steps intermittently, not because they were traps, but simply because she was running late. She hadn’t fallen asleep until late Sunday night – well, technically Monday morning – and she’d overslept as a result. Everyone would be at breakfast by now, and Lily would have to fight for a smidgen of marmalade. The elves always skimmed on Mondays.

Hurrying past, Lily’s trainers scuffed and squeaked against the stone floors, leaving marks in her wake, like she was a slug trailing mucus wherever she went. Filch would be thrilled. A portrait of a large man, deep in his cups and hunched over a kitchen table, opened a single eye accusingly at the noise she was making. Sir Arterton was always hungover on Mondays, and the rest of the weekday besides, so Lily hardly bothered to smile in his direction.

Everything about her was messy that morning. She hadn’t showered, so her long hair hung uncombed, greasy, and flat; her socks didn’t match; and her robes were on inside-out. The only concession to hygiene she’d managed was to brush her teeth because there were some things that simply couldn’t be sacrificed in the name of breakfast. Right before she was set to enter the Great Hall, Lily realized the inside-out robe situation. Irritated, she stripped them off and set about putting herself to marginal rights. Trying to walk and put on robes was generally ill-advised, so Lily became a little lost in the billowing fabric, struggling to find the right hole for arms and head before she managed it.

Peeking out from the collar of her robes, right in the doorway, Lily froze. All eyes in the Great Hall were on her. (She checked, there wasn’t someone infinitely more interesting, like Paul McCartney behind her.) Her struggles with her robes had certainly turned her into a spectacle, but not one that should have held more than passing interest, and these stares lasted much longer.

Lily figured her new relationship status had hit the Hogwarts masses. It was too bad. They could have sold a thousand papers if they’d broken the story as front-page news.

There was an indecent amount of pointing and murmuring that Lily might have predicted if she put her mind to it. This was the kind of social event that ought to upend the school. Mary and Sirius, so long paired, were no more. The most beautiful girl in school by many accounts, Mary, had been dumped and wordlessly at that. Lily had rocketed from the status of somewhat neurotic, hyper-involved Gryffindor to the girlfriend of a Marauder. Of course, the student body had long been prepared for just that, but they’d had a very different Marauder in mind.

Neither Mei-Lin nor Sirius were anywhere in sight, so Lily slid into the first available seat near the door. Lily reached immediately for the jar of marmalade, but sure enough, it was scraped bare. She couldn’t help but glare at a third-year seated nearby, who had heaps of it on his toast. It was so orange and sweet-looking that Lily wanted to lick the jug clean. Bitterly, she settled for blackberry jam on her toast.
Someone had discarded the morning paper in their rush to leave the Great Hall, so Lily snatched it up eagerly, scanning the headlines for something interesting. There was a story about the Minister of Magic choosing not to attend the upcoming international convention on dragon reserves. Nearly every European government would be sending their highest representative, but the Minister was choosing to stay in London to focus on the death eater threat. There were a few stories toward the back on the Academy Awards that had aired that Saturday. Some movie about boxing, called *Rocky*, had won Best Picture. Lily had never heard of it. There wasn’t so much as a mention about Indira Gandhi withdrawing the Indian state of emergency nine days earlier. Major muggle news rarely earned a follow-up.

Before Lily could get further than the second paragraph of the dragon reserves story, Marlene McKinnon dropped into the seat across from her, all smiles. *Her* hair was washed and styled into shiny, blonde curls that looked like they could spring back hard enough to knock a person out if pulled.

“Morning,” Lily said from over her paper.

“Good morning,” Marlene said. “Have a nice weekend?”

Lily snorted. “Well, thanks for diving right in, I guess. I did have a nice weekend, Marlene, as I’m sure you’ve heard.”

“Oh, I’ve heard all sorts of things. All sorts of ludicrous things, which is why I wanted to hear it straight from you. Everyone knows how much you hate to lie, Lily. So…dish,” Marlene said.

“At the party on Friday, I ended up spending a lot of time with Sirius. Things progressed naturally…as they do, and we snogged,” Lily said.

“Mmhm.”

“And then, the next day, we talked and decided, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to explore that a bit further.”

“Meaning?”

“We’re dating,” Lily said. 

Lily might have expected Marlene to launch into a thousand follow up questions or maybe to start grinning like an idiot, but she did neither. Instead, Marlene swiveled about in her chair to gesture down the table. Lily craned her neck, but she couldn’t see who Marlene was signaling. It seemed like half the school was watching for the outcome of their conversation.

“I’m going to be honest, I did not predict this one,” Marlene said.

“Do you mean in the Divination sense or the I-examined-your-personalities-and-didn’t-consider-this-match sense?” Lily asked.

Marlene sighed, “Both.”

“Don’t feel too down about it. I don’t think anyone did,” Lily comforted, knowing how much Marlene valued her ability to spot out Hogwarts couples. She was uncannily good at it, like when she’d pegged quiet Rita Slughorn and class clown Franklin Berry.

“Say would you be willing to do me a small favor if I said I’d give you the juicy details in exchange?” Lily asked.
“Depends,” Marlene said, but she leaned forward to hear the request.

Lily’s smile turned devious. “I bet the Slytherin table has some leftover marmalade, and I would kill for some right now.”

“Say no more!” Marlene said.

Breezily, she whisked over to the Slytherin table. There were so many advantages to being a pureblood who wasn’t forever ducking into corners to avoid Severus Snape. Mission Marmalade was a success, and Marlene was back at the Gryffindor table a minute later. Without hesitation, Lily dumped the remains of the jug all over her toast, slathering it thickly, so that there wasn’t a hint of white bread in sight.

She took one bite and nearly cried at the clashing taste of sweet and bitter. Wisely, Marlene waited until Lily’s toast was nothing but crumbs and a butter slick on her plate before pressing for details. And true to her word, she told Marlene everything – or at least, everything that could be shared – as they made their way to Charms.

Mei-Lin was already sitting in her usual spot when Lily arrived. The sight of Marlene and Lily entering class together earned a raised eyebrow, so Lily rushed to fill her in on the marmalade deal and her hectic morning.

“And you didn’t see Sirius at all?” Mei-Lin asked.

“Not yet,” Lily replied.

Toward the end of their date in the kitchens, Sirius had told her about his completely bonkers insomnia, so she wouldn’t be surprised if he’d slept in same as her, though she overslept because she was busy into the late hours of the night, while he longed to succumb to sleep. His nights followed a depressing pattern. Around eleven, his mates would put away the chess set, the cards, or the Zonko’s paraphernalia and declare it was time for bed. In reality, they wouldn’t fall asleep for another half hour at least as Sirius cajoled and harassed them to stay up for just a little longer with him. He said Peter could best be counted on to stay awake until midnight. After they’d all grown irritated and cast silencing charms around their beds, Sirius would find ways to fill the time: take a shower, read a book, revise, anything to stay awake for one more hour; because when he had run out of things to do, he would simply stare at the ceiling, longing for sleep that wouldn’t come.

Alcohol, he said, became his best friend during these long hours. A few fingers of whiskey could put him to sleep by three in the morning, and, when he woke up hungover, a few more could put his headache to rights again. It was a never-ending cycle of inebriation, and Lily wondered at his ability to walk in a straight line. She could hardly remember a time she’d seen him truly and utterly drunk. Even at the Grindylows party, she didn’t recall his behavior being that deviant, while she was blitzed out of mind and memory.

Not all the Marauders were missing from class. James, Remus, and Peter were all there in their usual seats. Peter and Remus sat in the very back of the class with Sirius and James paired up in the desks directly in front of them, making perfect targets for spitballs or other projectiles when Flitwick’s charms talk grew dull.

Every time Lily glanced behind her, she caught half of James’ gaze, like he was turning away from her that very moment. For someone who was trying to hide they were staring, he couldn’t mask the intensity. Lily was half-convinced he was glaring at her.

Sirius did make it to class in the end, wandering in five minutes after Flitwick had given the order to
read chapter 19. He looked pale, but that hardly meant much as the Blacks had always been ironically white. Lazily, he walked toward his normal seat beside James, only, instead of stopping, he kept walking right past his mates. Sirius arrived at the empty seat beside Wesley Morris, on the far side of the classroom, dropping into the desk and promptly falling asleep – or at least appearing to – with his head in his hands.

Half the class hadn’t noticed the abrupt change in seating, but those that had were busy whispering about it. James half rose to his feet, one hand planted on his desk for leverage and the other rising in Sirius’s direction, like he wanted to motion him over, but his hand clenched into a fist, and he sat back down without uttering a word. James spun about in his chair toward Remus and Peter, bent close, and contributed his own whispering to the mix.

Lily nudged Mei-Lin with her elbow, perhaps a bit too sharply as Mei-Lin hissed and rubbed the spot crossly. Busy discussing last night’s assignment with Rita Slughorn, Flitwick didn’t notice that the class had forgotten all about chapter 19.

“Sorry, just look at James…and Remus and Peter–,” Lily tacked the others on because she didn’t want to be too transparent. “–what do they look like right now, emotionally I mean?”

“Angry. Annoyed, for sure. Maybe a bit hurt,” Mei-Lin said. It wasn’t the first time she’d filled in the blanks for Lily.

Angry, annoyed, and hurt? Funny how that was exactly how Lily had felt towards James on Friday after the common room debacle. Lily dreaded that it was a Monday because she shared her first three classes with the lot of them – James, Sirius, and their mates –, and she didn’t want to be anywhere near an angry, annoyed, and hurt James Potter. His tongue could turn wicked on friend or foe.

Much the same drama occurred in DADA the next period with Sirius snubbing his mates and sitting elsewhere, only this time elsewhere meant by Lily. She saw his shadow first as he loomed over her desk, drawing her attention away from her assignment (which was perfect rubbish and sure to earn a failing mark). He gestured at the seat beside her with a smile, and his intention was clear.

“You can’t sit there. Mei-Lin sits there,” Lily said immediately. After class, Mei-Lin would nearly strangle Lily in hugs of gratitude for her loyalty.

The DADA classroom was arranged in sets of paired desks. Sirius chose to sit in the desk closest to Lily, which left Scott MacDougal scrambling to find a new seat. It was probably the closest a professor had ever come to Sirius during class time unless they were awarding him a detention, as Lily and Mei-Lin sat at the very front. Professor Chester, introducing the day’s subject, lost her train of thought at the sight of Sirius directly in front of her.

Napping through Charms had boosted Sirius’s energy, and he spent all of DADA tossing notes and generally terrorizing Lily and Mei-Lin. None of the notes had any substance and only served to attract Chester’s attention. Lily sat ramrod straight, not daring to look away from Chester for so much as a second, lest she start doling out detentions. To her left, Mei-Lin did the same, her normal class time doodles hidden beneath a stack of parchment and hands folded obediently.

Halfway through class, Lily finally chanced a glance around the room as Chester was writing instructions on the board and caught James in that same vehement stare.

“Mei-Lin, um, I think James is looking at me,” Lily muttered.

Her voice carried as she’d never mastered the art of the whisper. The noise caused Chester to swivel around, so Mei-Lin didn’t answer. Another crumpled note landed on her desk, this one featuring a
raunchy joke about pudding. Lily knocked it off her desk into her open satchel, where it disappeared amid another twenty such notes Sirius had lobbed at her.

“Yes,” Mei-Lin answered nearly five minutes later. “I know.”

“Is he just looking, though? Or is he, I don’t know, gazing? Peering? Glaring?” Lily said.

“Oh, definitely glaring.”

Brill.

The class let out a whole four minutes early, which was cause for celebration. Students sprinted through the door, laughing and chatting away like they’d been promised classes were cancelled for a week. After a long, dull double-period, people spent those four-minutes blinking into the sun like baby birds newly introduced to the world.

Everyone rushing for the door at once caused a jam up, throwing the Gryffindor boys together for the first time that morning. Sirius, acting as if he hadn’t ignored his closest friends all day, clapped a hand to Peter’s back.

“Wormtail, mate, think I can copy your Defense assignment before Wednesday? I anticipate I’ll have an acute case of I-don’t-care-about-my-marks that will flare up this evening,” Sirius said.

“Well, yeah, you always copy my work,” Peter said, casting an awkward glance to his other friends.

“Good chap,” Sirius said.

Enough space had cleared up that Sirius was able to squeeze through the door, ambling off in the opposite direction of the Great Hall and their awaiting lunch.

“Oi!” James called.

James stopped right in the middle of the doorway, leaving Lily and Mei-Lin trapped in the classroom as the Marauders’ friendship drama played out. Mei-Lin tapped her foot in a clear signal to hurry the hell up, but James paid her no mind.

“Come to lunch!” James demanded, shouting to Sirius who had stopped at the first call.

“Yeah, come on, Sirius. Don’t be stupid,” Remus seconded.


“Exactly what I meant by being stupid,” Remus muttered.

Sirius didn’t give into their beckoning and strode away whistling. None of the Marauders made a move to leave, so Lily politely tapped Remus on the shoulder, indicating that he’d barricaded her in the classroom. James didn’t budge, but Remus stepped aside so that the girls could squeeze through and hurry on their way. From behind her, Lily caught the tail end of their conversation.

“Bloody sensitive, unforgiving bastard,” James groaned. “This is ridiculous. It’s not like I did anything to him. All I said was –”

Remus cut him off, “Sirius just doesn’t know how to deal with conflict. Let him stew for a day, and then, he’ll be back.”

“Have you ever known Sirius to forgive someone in a day? Hell, have you ever known Sirius to
forgive, period?

Lily missed the answer. Mondays were too busy to waste on senseless, mystery drama.

The rest of the day soared past as decisively as Lily’s tennis serve, which she had the opportunity to practice for an hour that evening with Evangeline Presley. It was a beatific hour, during which she shed all the facts and assignments her professors had crammed into her skull, in favor of the muscle memory.

Afterwards, on their way back to the castle, Evangeline showed Lily a rather nasty scab on her elbow, earned by tripping down the Astronomy Tower stairs. Lily loved to pick at scabs like a demon, and Evangeline let Lily run her fingers all over it, peeling at the edges but not quite ripping it off – it wasn’t ready yet – with only a few disgusted comments.

It was probably for the best that Lily spent the last two and a half hours focused on tennis, with a mind as empty as a child’s Halloween basket in November, because it meant she entirely forgot that she’d be foregoing dinner for another group project meeting with the Supreme Wanker. She couldn’t decide which was worse: the company or the Transfiguration. Moodily, she trooped to the library.

Everyone but a few NEWT-crazed seventh-years were at dinner, so Lily had her pick of tables. Madame Pince was scouring the Herbology stacks for litter, snogging couples, and other disruptive forces, so Lily chose a table toward the Potions section as far from the bird-like matron as possible.

The table was settled beside the library’s largest window. It was originally designed with wooden shutters to wrench closed in the event of storm or battle, but they’d since been replaced with glass, the wooden panels hanging open all hours of the day. Lily and the window were well-acquainted. She could hardly stand to finish a page of her reading (unless it was one of her chosen, pleasure reads) without staring longingly out a window, any window, and this window was particularly appealing because it looked out over the Quidditch Pitch. Lily wasn’t much of a flyer, but she loved to watch the teams at practice. She thought people never appeared more alive than when they were whisking by on a broomstick, and the agonies of homework became all the more unbearable when she could watch her classmates at play.

James announced his arrival rather thoroughly by blocking her view of the window with his body and dumping all of his books on the table with enough force to send it shaking. His mood was black.

The whole school was abuzz with gossip about how furious he looked, storming the halls like a category four hurricane. When Lily rowed with her mates, she drowned her feelings in gobs of chocolate and moped about in her room. James assaulted library tables.

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No niceties, no warm-up, James moved straight into it, “So, you and Sirius are a real thing now?”

“Yes.”

“Brilliant.”

“I don’t know why you care,” Lily said, unable to keep her mouth shut and let the already stilted conversation die and fade into Transfiguration talk.

“You don’t know why I care that my best mate is dating a girl who’s categorically ill-suited for him?” James answered.

Lily’s first, petty thought was that she loved to see him frazzled. Her second even more self-serving thought was that she hoped James wasn’t telling Sirius they were an ill-suited couple. What if James convinced him, and he chucked her before her investigation even fully began?
So, Lily argued, “We’re both Gryffindors. We’re both politically aligned. He’s smart. He’s fit. Seems like a fine match to me.”

“Oh, really? You don’t mind that he’s an unambitious lout? You?” James challenged.

“No, maybe I need someone who doesn’t care about things to balance me out,” Lily lied.

“Sure,” James scoffed. “You’re a human battering ram, Evans. You make as many enemies as friends, and he’s the most sensitive prick in thirty leagues. The most oblivious person I’ve ever met dating the most calculating. A magical match.”

“I’m not oblivious,” Lily said, perfectly offended.

Sneering, mean, James leaned in, so they were only a breath apart. “You’re so oblivious, Lily, you haven’t even figured out the truth right in front of your face. He’s using you.”

Talk about having it backwards.

Needless to say, they didn’t get much work done that day. They stayed in the library for three quarters of an hour, and at the end, all they had to show for it was two sentences of a thought on transfiguring a globe at the atomic level.

Lily would have preferred to eat some dinner.

Astronomy was the most dropped course when students reached third-year and gained control over their schedules. It had been true in 1842, and it was true in 1973. Every Gryffindor in her year had promptly dropped the class in favor of more exciting subjects, except for Lily and Marlene. Marlene stuck around because she loved Divination, and the two subjects naturally complemented each other. Lily stuck around because she loved space.

Lily remembered, like just about every muggleborn, sitting in front of the telly when Neil Armstrong took that first step onto the moon. Lily hadn’t been able to tell whether the astronauts looked alien because of their bulky suits or the way they bounced in the moon’s perverse gravity.

They were so reserved about their historic landing, and Lily had never been able to understand it. How had Aldrin and Armstrong even decided who got to take that first fateful step? In their place, Lily would have hogtied Armstrong in the loo and botched the whole mission just for the chance to be the first person in the history of the entire bloody universe to step foot on the moon. Then, she’d probably have done something completely unprofessional like roll around on its surface and weep into her big white gloves as the emotions caught up with her.

Space flight wasn’t in the cards for Lily. Britain stubbornly refused to fund its own fleet of astronauts, despite the many letters Lily had written when she was 10-years-old, just begging them to reconsider sending her to space someday. It wasn’t the appeal of adventure alone that held her interest, however, and Lily remained fascinated by space. That winter hols, she’d read every article in the local library on the Viking 1 landing – soil samples from Mars! - and had even ripped out a page from *Life Magazine*, featuring a picture of the spacecraft. She’d spirited it from the library beneath her coat, and it now hung on the wall of her dormitory.

On Tuesday night, trooping down the girls’ staircase, Lily regretted not following the pack and dropping Astronomy from her roster. She was sure she could name several better ways to spend the hours from midnight to two in the morning. Sinatra insisted that her sixth-year students were developed enough to stay up into the wee hours of the morning, but Lily wanted to lodge a formal
protest. She was still a baby and ought to be restricted to her common room come midnight! It was
dark and would be only too easy to trip down the stairs to her doom, and the scabs wouldn’t even be
worth it.

The common room was almost completely barren as she passed through it, except for the usual night
owls, including Sirius. They still hadn’t cemented their new relationship by actually speaking to one
other, outside the note-throwing incident, so Lily only nodded her head at him in passing. He didn’t
take the hint and clambered out of the Portrait Hole behind her.

“Sneaking around after curfew? They tell me I’m a bad influence, but I didn’t know I worked this
fast,” Sirius said.

“Astronomy,” Lily explained.

“Perfect! I’ll walk you,” Sirius offered. “Everyone’s asleep, and I need to stretch my legs. I can’t
stand to hear James muttering to himself. He writes full novels in his sleep, I swear.”

“Oh, are you speaking again?” Lily asked.

Sirius nodded, “I was just in a mood, and what is it mums always say? ‘If you have nothing nice to
say, better to say nothing at all?’ Course, my mum never said that. She was more likely to say, ‘if
you have something nice to say, check yourself into Mungo’s right quick, it’s a brain tumor!’”

“Families,” Lily said weakly.

“Don’t start looking at me like that,” Sirius warned.

Lily didn’t have to guess at the look on her face. Dysfunctional families always hit too close to home,
and if she thought he’d have let her, she’d have hugged him. Sympathy aside, Lily wanted to make
excuses to hug him on a regular basis. Sirius wore the finest quality robes that she’d ever
encountered. They were silky, gliding through her passing fingers like water, but still substantial
enough to retain heat. At night, Lily would love nothing more than to ball his robes up and clutch
them to her cheek as a counterpoint to the softness of her pillow.

“I am starved,” Sirius announced.

“Dinner was only a few hours ago,” Lily said.

“Lifetimes ago,” Sirius corrected, “Though I actually ate at nine. Every day the blokes and I go to the
kitchens for a nine o’clock snack. It’s the most sacred of traditions.”

“What’d you have tonight?”

“Coffee cake.”

“Did you go yesterday?” Lily asked.

“Yeah, even I wasn’t cross enough to skip the kitchen run,” Sirius said.

Lily felt immensely relieved to hear that James and Sirius had mended their relationship over a plate
of snacks. Moody Sirius was obnoxious and quiet. Cheerful Sirius, in comparison, was loquacious.
She wanted him to spill his guts.

As they walked, Sirius regaled her with stories of over-eating in the kitchens and all the places Peter
had resultantly puked in the castle. Lily swore she’d never be able to look at the fourth-floor alcove
the same way again. They reached the foot of the Astronomy Tower a few minutes before the fourth-year class was to let out, so they sat on the foot of the steps with their legs stretched out, Sirius’s extending far beyond her own.

Sirius didn’t know much about space travel or muggles in general, so Lily regaled with him an explanation of NASA and the competition between the Americans and the Soviets. Like always, Lily grew cross when her pureblood classmate didn’t know even the most basic information about the muggle world that existed three meters from his oblivious nose – she took special umbrage to explaining who Kennedy was and the fall-out of his assassination – but Sirius did her the favor of being interested at least.

They heard the fourth-years let out before they saw them. Tired voices bounced down the staircase, moaning about their essay due next week and pining after their beds. Lily stood up and stretched, uninterested in the emerging class, but Sirius stared straight up the staircase, like he was expecting someone.

“Right, so I guess I’ll see you tomorrow,” Lily said.

Sirius nodded and then, inexplicably, began stripping out of his robes. Like he might be nude beneath, Lily shielded her eyes, but she couldn’t stop herself from peeking. She was curious by nature.

“It must be freezing at night up there. Take these,” Sirius ordered, passing her the discarded robes.

Lily stood still as Sirius helped drape his bulkier robes over her own. They smelled strongly of whiskey, and extra fabric pooled at her feet. True to their purpose, they were warm, and she shivered in relief as her internal temperature adjusted.

“Thank you, I –”

Lily didn’t get to finish her thought because Sirius shouted out a greeting to one of the last fourth-years exiting the Astronomy Tower. The younger boy froze up at the sight of Sirius. Lily had never paid much mind to the boy but there was no mistaking him; the dark hair, square jaw, and unforgiving slant of nose left no doubt that this was Regulus Black. He’d grown since his first-year sorting, and he now had a centimeter and some bulk on Lily, though he remained slighter than his older brother.

Uncaring that Regulus had stopped in the middle of the stairwell with no signs of joining them, Sirius continued, “Did you have a productive lesson, Rex? I hope you were paying attention. Nothing is more important than your education.”

Regulus closed his eyes and took a few fortifying breaths. He couldn’t stay blocking the staircase forever as several sixth-years had arrived for the midnight class, so Regulus moved aside. Grudgingly, he trudged the few remaining steps to reach Sirius.

“Fancy meeting you here. This is just perfect,” Sirius said, still the only one of the trio who had spoken a word. “I wanted to introduce you to Lily. Lily, this is my baby brother, Regulus. Regulus, this is Lily, Lily Evans. I’m sure you’ve heard of her. There’s hardly an extracurricular she’s not a part of. Have you two met?”

“I don’t think so,” Lily said, which might not have been strictly true. She suspected she’d sold him a paper once.

She smiled kindly at Regulus, who did not return the gesture. His chin was raised, and Lily fell rather
beneath his notice. While they stood there awkwardly, Sirius’s left arm looped around her shoulders, bringing her solidly against his hip in a sideways hug of feather-soft fabric.

“Lily’s my new girlfriend. We’re just mad about each other. Isn’t that right?” Sirius said, directing the final question to Lily, who hardly knew how to answer. Fortunately, Sirius didn’t wait for her to respond before plowing forward, “Tell Regulus what your parents do, Lil.”

“Well, my mother is dead, so she doesn’t do much of anything,” Lily said.

For the first time Regulus looked at her, “I’m sorry to hear that. Our father passed only a few months ago.”

“I heard. My condolences,” Lily said politely. There was an immediate and unspoken bond between kids who’d lost their parents, and Lily could feel it blossom between her and Regulus. Immediately, the corridor felt warmer as the flower of their connection brightened the dank corridor.

Sirius merely waved his hand. “Yes, yes, yes, but tell him what your father does.”

“If Regulus answered yes, Lily was prepared to give him a long lecture on the technology and process that went into producing paper. Her father worked at an integrated mill, which produced pulp and paper side by side. They’d receive shipments of logs and wood chips, which were then run through the machines. Cokeworth was a mostly abandoned town, devoid of industry, but the river had attracted the paper business, as water was essential to powering a mill. It stank up the whole town with the smell of sulphur, and Lily would always pinch her nose when she drove past on the way home from Hogwarts, unused to the smell that, within days, would seep into her clothes and the fine hairs of her nostrils, until she forgot she’d ever breathed fresh air in the first place.

Lily would have explained all of this, except Regulus didn’t appear to care at all.

“This is pathetic,” he said directly to Sirius.

Lily’s jaw dropped.

Grinning happily, Sirius said, “Love to stay and chat, but you have to slither back to the Dungeons before curfew sets in. I’ve served enough detentions for the both of us.”

Regulus said something positively obscene and stomped off, while Lily gaped after him. It was common wisdom that you shouldn’t introduce your significant other to the family too early in the relationship because it could botch the whole thing up, make it too serious too soon, but Lily didn’t think this was the kind of behavior that advice columnists were warning against.

“What was that?” Lily asked, staring after Regulus’s retreating back.

“He’s fourteen,” Sirius said dismissively. “He’s never had a girlfriend, and I think he’s still embarrassed by the whole thing. It’s my duty as a big brother to tease him mercilessly.”

Figuring she had no business judging a fraught sibling relationship when her own with Petunia was so complicated, Lily nodded. From the top of the tower, Lily could hear Sinatra introducing the class. She would still rather have been perched in front of the fire, but with Sirius’s robes, at least she was
warm. The benefits of fake-dating were already accruing.

Lily gave Sirius a chaste kiss on the cheek and hurried up the stairs. Just before the staircase curved and Sirius would disappear from her line of sight, Lily whirled around to take one last look at him. He was walking away, but in the opposite direction of Gryffindor Tower. Lily hoped he managed to get some sleep soon; only one of them should have to suffer from lack of it.

March was a prolonged yawn after the long slog of Scottish winter; but, come 1 April, nature blinked its eyes wide open. Yellow sunshine poured through the open windows. Dandelions had sprouted overnight, so that bursts of color decorated the newly sharp green grass, and the trees coyly teased open the year’s first blossoms, wet and fresh as a peach and twice as fragrant. In the few minutes between class times, students took the longest routes across the castle, the ones that required a stroll through open courtyards, where they could feel the breeze pick up the hem of their robes and watch as flocks of pink-footed geese soared overhead, departing for their Icelandic breeding grounds. They’d block out the sun as they swarmed past, but only for a moment, and then, the sky would be hot and inviting all over again.

Lily peered surreptitiously from behind a corner, aware that she had to make a left into the busy and open Entrance Hall to make it to Transfiguration. It would put her in the direct line of fire for anyone inclined to drop a water balloon on her head or turn her hair blue. 1 April did not merely herald spring; it brought out the worst in the Marauders, who coopted April Fool’s Day as their own. On this day, having so much as locked eyes with the Marauders sometime over the last six months made you a prime target, and Lily had never survived their April Fool’s Day shenanigans unscathed.

Each year, they played the traditional pranks that left corridors smelling foul and students’ uniforms destroyed. These were hardly rare for the Marauders, standing out only in quantity on 1 April. Then, they’d also supplement with some truly ambitious practical jokes. Last year, they’d managed to nick every student’s wand in the castle, replacing them with fake wands from Zonko’s. No one realized until the first classes of the day, when practical assessments went wildly awry. Third-year, they’d overtaken the kitchens. Students arrived to lunch to see scrumptious caramelized apples on the table, only to bite in and realize they were caramel-coated onions instead. Just about every plate on the table sported a similar surprise. In second-year, the showers had sprayed everyone with beetles instead of water. It was a miracle any of the female population had ever forgiven them for that one.

Far and away, their greatest victory had been in fourth-year. They’d planned it for months, brewing Polyjuice potion back behind the Quidditch locker rooms and stealing hair from their targets. Come the dawn of April and chaos had reigned. First, they transformed into the professors, giving detentions and failing marks and cancelling classes in a whirlwind of abused authority. When it wore out, they simply switched to the Slytherin sixth-years, and when that was over, the Hufflepuff Quidditch team, etc., etc. Everyone knew what was happening by lunch, and the whole day was filled with mindless confusion because there was no way of knowing whether you were talking to your best mate or Remus Lupin. There were cases where the imposter would meet up with the original, and friends would be challenged to pick the real from the copy, both protesting and begging their hapless mates to recognize them. Lily had spent twenty minutes talking to Peter Pettigrew, who had transformed into Dorcas, about how much she loathed James Potter for picking on Severus. The potion had worn out while they were still conversing, and Lily had nearly blown a fuse in anger as Peter rolled around on the floor laughing.

Trying to make it to class without incident, Lily reflected that she hated this stupid day. She was too exhausted to worry about the size of the target on her back – did dating Sirius give her a layer of protection or make her a likelier target than ever? The late Astronomy class had taken its toll, and
Lily had overslept straight through Charms and DADA. She vaguely recalled Mei-Lin shaking her a few times before heading to breakfast, so Lily couldn’t even feel angry about being abandoned. It was her own fault, and she was already mentally rearranging her schedule to accommodate the detentions she was sure to receive. Thankfully, she’d woken up in time for Transfiguration. McGonagall was particularly unforgiving about absences.

Against the odds, Lily made it to class without any April Fool’s Day shenanigans. Before class began, Mei-Lin showed Lily her doodles from that morning and asked what she should draw next – cartoon talking bacon or sketches of a unicorn. Figuring they’d have one too many jokes that day, Lily chose the staid unicorn idea.

“Hey, I don’t see Sirius or his mates,” Lily said, glancing around the classroom. Class had just begun but there were six or seven empty seats, which McGonagall did not acknowledge.

“They haven’t been in any classes all morning,” Mei-Lin whispered.

Shivers of dread dripped down her spine. Their absence could not signal anything good. They were probably going to blow up the Quidditch pitch – no, James would never – the greenhouses, then. Something epic was brewing, and Lily was terrified. Mei-Lin nodded in agreement to her unspoken fear.

Several hours later, dinner arrived, but the Marauders prank was still impending. By this point, the entire student body was jittery. A strange look from a friend was enough to have third-years jumping to their feet and screeching accusations. Trust was at an all-time low.

An owl soared through the open window and headed straight for Lily. It wasn’t uncommon for owls to deliver mail during dinner to students who had missed breakfast, but Lily had a bad feeling about the approaching owl. It was probably her detention slip from McGonagall. That or the owl was brainwashed by the Marauders and was going to shit in her hair. Students at the Ravenclaw table cowered as it passed overhead, so she wasn’t the only one with suspicions.

The owl stopped in front of Lily, stick-thin leg extended for her to unwrap her letter. It wasn’t a detention slip, but her monthly letter from Petunia. It was curt, perfunctory, except where Petunia talked about time spent with her boyfriend. There, her writing became suffused with a warm glow, and adjectives slipped into her prose.

When they were little girls, Petunia and Lily would always play make-believe games. Lily liked nothing more than a sprawling adventure, wanting to play Nancy Drew or Titanic or the Gunpowder Plot, while Petunia preferred more domestic games, where she sipped daintily at her tea set and fell in love. Lily didn’t mind these romantic games.

Lily would usually play Davy Jones of the Monkees, as Petunia was absolutely mad for the show from the Pilot episode on and managed to save up enough money to buy every one of their records. As Davy, Lily would pretend to visit Cokeworth, eating at the local chip shop or stopping at the corner store, where Petunia played the proprietor. The attraction would be instant, and Davy would fall head over heels for Petunia’s straight blonde hair and refined laugh. Cue, a series of dates in which Lily would compliment Petunia endlessly, lip-sync to the Monkees’ record, and propose marriage. In this way, Lily and Petunia staged at least fifty fake weddings. Sometimes Lily would kiss Petunia on the cheek at the end of the ceremony; other times, Petunia would kiss a pillow held between their faces, leaving a wet mark from her tongue.

Dripping between the lines of Petunia’s letter was the same infatuation she’d once sported for Davy Jones, and Lily couldn’t begrudge her sister a second of her enthusiasm. Maybe, just maybe, her heart gave a little squeeze of pain at the thought of Petunia replacing her, finding someone else to
love and cherish, but Lily was an adult now, or just about. She didn’t need Petunia to sing her to sleep or play surrogate mother any longer.

Her mood in a complete jumble, Lily polished off the last of her goblet of water and rose to leave the Great Hall. Exiting through the massive double-doors, Lily passed right by Professor McGonagall. She braced herself for what was to come – a lecture on the importance of attendance and a reminder of Lily’s so-so DADA performance – but it didn’t come. McGonagall smiled thinly at Lily and Mei-Lin before walking to the professors’ table.

Lily was shocked. Amazed. Bamboozled. This was an Invasion of the Body Snatchers moment if she’d ever seen one. Craning around to stare at McGonagall’s retreating back, Lily questioned aloud what had just happened and whether McGonagall might have introduced a new form of torture: detention withholding, where students wandered the halls in a state of anxiety, awaiting the inevitable drop of the axe.

Not listening at all, Mei-Lin shoved a hand over Lily’s mouth and dragged her behind a suit of armor. Shocked, Lily hardly followed Mei-Lin’s gestures. Mei-Lin pointed to right around the corner where Marlene was chatting with Iris Soto about why she hadn’t been in DADA that morning. Uninterested in their conversation, Lily turned to Mei-Lin quizzically, mouth already open to question what the hell she was doing, but Mei-Lin quickly put a finger to Lily’s lips. Lily, of course, bit it. She could hardly do anything else! And, Mei-Lin made a nasty hand gesture in retaliation before, again, pointing to Marlene.

Listening to the two girls once again, Lily realized what had made Mei-Lin go batty. They were talking about the Grindylows. Or rather, Marlene was talking about them, rather inconspicuously in fact.

“They call them kelp. You know, to keep up with the lake theme. So, kelp are the newest recruits in the couple months between when they’re first tapped and when they take over as seventh-years. There’s some hazing, but nothing too terrible,” Marlene said. “Then, their leader is a play on the theme as well. The Most Esteemed and Righteous Master of Activities and Niceties, which is a complete mouthful, but it forms the acronym ‘Merman,’ and merpeople are the only creatures that can possibly tame a grindylow. Or at least, that’s what I’ve heard. You know I don’t pay attention in Care of Magical Creatures.”

“I really can’t tell if that’s stupid or brilliant,” Mei-Lin whispered.

“Somewhere in between?” Lily hazarded.

There was no way she was going to remember all the words in that acronym, so Lily quickly unearthed her notebook and began jotting everything down. The vernacular details were interesting, but Lily was particularly grateful for confirmation of her suspicions that new members were recruited in sixth-year, mixing with the seventh-years. Iris Soto showered Marlene with attention and questions about the Grindylows, which was probably what Marlene had wanted all along, but Marlene coquettishly refused to answer any more, hedging as if she might know their deepest secrets but couldn’t possibly say.

Until now, Lily hadn’t considered Marlene a proper suspect, but she reevaluated following these revelations. How would Marlene know secret points of order about the Grindylows if she wasn’t one of their order? She could have been conscripted for her popularity. Heavens knew Marlene was on familiar terms with just about everyone in the school from second-to seventh-year.

The conversation moved on in the face of Marlene’s coy answers, and Lily readied herself to leave. She didn’t care about whether Nadia Kovalenko and Tristan Codrington were on the outs or more in
love than ever, even if Marlene was fascinated by the subject. Just before she left, however, Iris said something that stopped her dead in her tracks.

“I can’t believe Sirius and James are still on the outs. Have they ever rowed this long before?”

“Not that I can remember. It’s been days now, and I’m sick of it,” Marlene said.

“At least they’re talking instead of skulking around each other,” Isis said.

“Yes, but it’s just in the air between them, even when they’re having a laugh. Everything’s a mess right now with Mare and then, those two. Dark times for Gryffindor,” Marlene lamented.

Lily grabbed Mei-Lin by the shoulders. “You have to go out there! Find out what they’re arguing about!”


“Please, please, please!” Lily begged. “What if it’s about me? I need to know.”

Lily hadn’t admitted her fear about their row until that moment. Even in her own mind, the speculation had been taboo. It was too narcissistic, but she couldn’t escape the fear that she was at the root of their argument. The timeline fit too perfectly, and James’ glares in class were certainly evidence in favor of her hypothesis. On the way to Astronomy, Sirius had told her that everything was sorted. She hoped it was and that Marlene was merely misinformed, but she couldn’t risk it.

“Fine!” Mei-Lin said too loudly, yielding beneath Lily’s pleading eyes.

Timidly, Mei-Lin made her way to where Marlene and Iris were gossiping. In front of others, Mei-Lin always transformed, shrank even deeper into her oversized robes and jumpers. There was something in her posture that screamed of an apology for daring to exist in other people’s space. Sometimes when she walked and her footsteps clattered loudly, Mei-Lin would cringe, like she’d set off a fire alarm.

Worried that Mei-Lin’s approach would draw the other girls’ eyes in her direction, Lily pulled away from the corner. She’d settle for hearing their voices.

“Um, hello, McKinnon. Soto,” Mei-Lin said in a low voice. “Are you talking about Sirius and James? I’ve noticed they’ve been acting strangely lately.”

Lily stifled a groan at Mei-Lin’s completely awkward line of question. There was a reason she was restricted to the Sports section.

“You and everyone else,” Iris said, ignoring the awkwardness. Her voice was deeper than both Marlene’s and Mei-Lin’s. It was rich like the scent of a cinnamon candle.

“Do you have any idea what they’re arguing about?” Mei-Lin asked.

“Well, no one can say for sure,” Marlene said. “It depends on your timeline of events. See, I swear they were already bickering Friday at breakfast, but–”

“If it started Friday night, I think we all know what it’s about,” Iris said, laughing.

Lily couldn’t resist a peek around the corner. Iris was looking conspiratorially toward Marlene, like she was expecting her to join in on the joke.

“Friday night?” Mei-Lin parroted.
Iris nodded. “Come on, Evans and Sirius? That must have killed James.”

Eavesdropping only ever punished the listener, and Lily found her breathing grow desperate as she processed Iris’s smug comments. She told herself that James was just arrogant and possessive, that he liked the idea of having a sycophantic admirer and was upset that she was no longer willing to play the part, but her feet were twitching and her flight instinct was activated. She felt attacked.

“They’ll get over it. They’re not going to let a girl come between them,” Marlene said with confidence that Lily desperately coveted.

“It’s not a girl. It’s Lily Evans,” Iris said. “She –”

Lily didn’t wait to hear more. She gave into her impulse to run, dashing in the opposite direction toward the Slytherin dungeons. There was a half hour lag period between dinner and the Potions Society meeting, which Lily spent sitting on the cold floor, rationalizing everything she’d heard. By the time Slughorn unlocked the classroom, knocking her in the side with the door, she was perfectly calm.

James Potter was a prat, and she did not care about whatever nonsense he got up to in his friendships, even if the friend was her technical, though fake, boyfriend. In fact, if she felt any emotion, it was anger instead of panic. She’d dealt enough with Severus’s obnoxious claims to ownership over her to be hostile towards the slightest signal a boy was growing possessive.

Speaking of Severus, Lily noticed he had bothered to show up to their meeting that week. He’d skipped the last one, which was highly unusual for him. So unusual that Lily half expected he was dying in the Hospital Wing with a bad case of Dragon Pox. The idea that he’d skived off to sleep or hang out with his “friends” was impossible. The only thing that brought Severus any peace was the chance to brew and experiment in his cauldron.

A perfect storm of realizations hit Lily in the middle of the Potions Society meeting, so that she couldn’t even sort through which thought occurred to her first. Each realization built directly into the others, strengthening them.

The Marauders, Marlene, and many other students had missed class today. The Marauders hadn’t performed their April Fool’s Day prank. It wasn’t the first suspicious disappearance of late, like Severus missing a Potions Society meeting. Severus had attended the Grindylows party.

Lily left the dungeons certain of two things. First, she needed to find out who had missed class that day beyond the Gryffindor boys. Second, if the Marauders hadn’t returned from their mysterious disappearance, that left their dormitory wide-open for investigation.

Forty minutes later, Lily stood at the foot of the boys’ staircase, flanked by Mei-Lin and Will. They’d had a quick debrief on Mei-Lin’s interrogation of Isis and Marlene, but there’d been nothing significant said after Lily fled the scene. Isis claimed that James majorly fancied Lily, but Lily knew that was far from true, and she discarded the idea outright. Besides, Marlene seemed to think there was something else brewing between the boys, and the possibility of an invisible variable made far greater sense.

Forgetting about Isis and Marlene, Lily focused on her new, totally brilliant plan. It was simple: sneak into the Marauders’ dormitory, root around for clues, and make the greatest breakthrough in Hogwarts history. Simple.

True to form, Mei-Lin had some concerns.
“But how do you know that they’re not back already? Marlene was at dinner, and you said Sev was at the Society meeting,” Mei-Lin said. Very logical that Mei-Lin.

“Yes, but they weren’t at dinner, and Sirius told me just yesterday that they always go to the kitchens at nine. It’s what –?” Lily checked her watch, “Half past nine, right now, which means they shouldn’t be back for a while longer.”

“Okay, but what about Hinkley and Niazi? Are they supposed to just not care that we’re rooting around their dormitory?” Mei-Lin said.

There was a fair point, and Lily bounced on the balls of her feet as her brain raced into problem-solving mode. Khalid and Duane hadn’t been missing all day, so there was no way to account for their whereabouts. They weren’t best mates with the Marauders, but they were on good terms and would definitely spill the beans about an invasion of three-fourths of the newspaper staff.

“I think I have a plan,” Will said, his mouth twisting up into a devious smile.

Will had to make a quick dash back to the Hufflepuff dormitories, but a short time later, he was ready and armed with a Dungbomb from his last trip to Hogsmeade. Athletic and speedy, Mei-Lin was given the crucial task of dropping the Dungbomb upstairs. The whole thing took about thirty-five seconds with Mei-Lin taking off from a sprinting position, disposing of the Dungbomb right outside the sixth-year boys’ door, and then making a mad dash back, so that she wasn’t caught out in the act.

Back downstairs, Lily and Will pretended everything was normal. They sat on the floor by the stairs – perhaps not completely inconspicuous – with a *Witch’s Weekly* held between them. Returning from her mission, Mei-Lin veered left and threw herself bodily onto the ground. She stretched out, so that she lay on her stomach with her chin propped on her hands and pointed at a picture in the magazine. It was the pose that Duane and Khalid caught as they came stomping down the staircase, their curses rebounding.

“I’m going to McGonagall. I’ve had it!” Duane bellowed. “It’s always something with those four. I just want to sleep and pass my classes.”

“Get it together, mate. You’ll regret it in the morning if you say something now,” Khalid urged.

Duane stormed out of the portrait hole with Khalid at his heels, but before he was out of earshot, Duane agreed not to report anything. The two boys just needed a walk to cool off. Before the Fat Lady had swung fully closed, Lily and her friends were creeping up the stairs, wasting no time. The smell of the Dungbomb was foul, like an egg left to boil for days in the sun mixed with essence of skunk. Lily knew a charm to freshen the air, and she cast it about the corridor before they entered the dormitory.

“So, what exactly are we looking for?” Will asked, pulling the door to a gentle close.

“Anything suspicious.”

“Helpful, Lily,” Will deadpanned.

“Sorry…I suppose, I want to know whether they’re all members. I suspect Peter isn’t, but then again, he wasn’t in class either, so what does that mean? Notes, itineraries. If we’re blessed, a diary,” Lily said.

“A calendar with ‘Grindylows’ written in big letters on the first of the month,” Mei-Lin joked.

“Our silver bullet,” Lily agreed.
The dormitory was much like Lily remembered it. Clean and uncluttered, with everything packed away in the boys’ trunks or folded on the edge of one of the beds that formed a semi-circle around the edge of the room. This time, Lily paid more attention to her surroundings, noting the posters and clippings the boys had hung on the walls. There was one sliver of wall bedecked with pictures of Quidditch players mid-dive or blocking the posts with a well-placed headbutt, which Lily assumed belonged to James. Another bed was surrounded by hand-written reminders of things to do with sporadic clippings about dragon sightings. The bed on the far right was decorated with dozens of photos from the Doctor Who series. Two of the beds bore no decorations whatsoever. The last bed, which no doubt belonged to Sirius, showed the most variety: girls, motorbikes, girls on motorbikes, the Rolling Stones, girls with the Rolling Stones.

Lily went to Sirius’s section of the room, intent on exploring his trunk. Knowing his penchant for neatness, she was careful as she explored not to disrupt things too terribly. He’d know someone had rooted about his things if she went about it like a whirling dervish of energy. Will had no such worries as he raided the Doctor Who bed, tearing the trunk apart in his search.

Unlike most students, Sirius sported several trunks. One stood tall, lengthwise, and opened up like a closet, revealing his pressed robes, jackets, hung trousers and other clothes. His shoes lay in an orderly line at the bottom. Another trunk was really nothing but a mini bar filled with brandy and scotch and all the other foul-tasting drinks that Sirius touted about in the pockets of his robes. The scent of his flask was nastier than the dampened smell of Dungbomb that still permeated the room.

Lily was just starting on the third trunk under his bed, which looked to hold his school supplies, when Mei-Lin announced that she’d found something.

Tucked beneath the pillow of one of the beds with bare walls, Mei-Lin had found a blank sheet of parchment. There was nothing odd about having spare parchment about, of course, but typically students didn’t tuck it beneath their pillow at night. There was no odd-scrap-of-parchment fairy.

Lily sat up on her knees to take a look. She ran her fingers over the crinkled surface. There wasn’t much to it.

“Maybe they write in invisible ink,” Lily suggested. “We could throw some lemon juice on it.”

“Pretty sure if they use invisible ink, it’ll be the magical kind,” Will called, his head hidden beneath one of the beds.

Curiously, Mei-Lin tapped her wand to the parchment. Words filled the page.

Mei-Lin read aloud, “Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs…demand you stop touching our property, you thieving tart!”

“That’s Peter, isn’t it? That little git. Do you think they’re writing these messages somewhere now?” Mei-Lin demanded.

“Thieving tart!” Mei-Lin didn’t much care about the origins of the parchment or its uses, squawking at the insult. “I’m not stealing it. I’m looking at it. And I’m not a tart!” Mei-Lin told the parchment.

New words bloomed on the page.

“Messr. Moony is not impressed by your indignation, you ignoramus. Messr. Wormtail suggests your presence in the boys’ dormitory is all the evidence he needs that you’re a tart,” Lily read.

“Thieving tart!” Mei-Lin didn’t much care about the origins of the parchment or its uses, squawking at the insult. “I’m not stealing it. I’m looking at it. And I’m not a tart!” Mei-Lin told the parchment.

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“Dunno. Do you know anything about the Grindylows?” Lily asked the parchment, poking it with Mei-Lin’s wand for good measure.

_Messr. Padfoot believes a day-old flobberworm knows more than you about every conceivable subject. Messr. Prongs would like to ask how you’ve managed not to fall out a window to your death with so few brain cells to guide you through the world._

Lily giggled. “It’s kind of funny, actually.”

With a huff, Mei-Lin snatched the parchment from Lily’s hand and returned it to its original hiding spot. They continued their search in silence for another five minutes, turning up all sorts of contraband from Zonko’s, pornography, cigarettes, and more, but nothing that linked directly to the Grindylows.

Lily moved her attention to the small stand beside Sirius’s bed. She was surprised to see he’d checked out a book from the library. It fell straight open to the last page he’d been reading because he’d marked it with a tassled bookmark. The text opened to a chapter on the proper performance of the Patronus charm. In the margins, Sirius had scrawled a series of suggestions – Lily could recognize his handwriting from the note passing days earlier – on what to recollect while casting and how to angle his wand. One of the notes read: _Must master by Ides of March_. Lily marveled at the coincidence; she too had been studying the Patronus Charm at the beginning of March.

Cackles from Will interrupted her reading. Lily turned to find him doubled over another textbook. This one Lily recognized from the year before; it was the _Standard Book of Spells: Year 5_. Wordlessly, Will opened to the title page. There, someone had doodled Lily’s name over and over again. Some of the doodles had replaced the dot above the ‘i’ with a heart.

“What on earth?” Lily demanded.

“It’s Potter’s,” Will said, still chuckling like mad.

Irritated, Lily tore the book from Will’s hand, snapped it shut, and kicked it beneath the nearest bed. Out of sight, out of mind. He had ugly handwriting, Lily thought venomously.

Mei-Lin started verbally cataloguing everything she found for their benefit. There was nothing of interest before she mentioned she’d found a copy of _The Fountain of Fair Fortune_. It wasn’t the short story version found in _The Tales of Beedle the Bard_, but rather a worn-copy of the play. Will leapt to his feet, flustered, saying that he’d found another copy of it as well. A thorough search of all the books in the room found that there were three copies in total. It seemed all of their discoveries were to be book-related that night.

Lily flipped through one of the scripts. Every one of the Luckless Knight’s lines had been underlined with blue ink, and there were blocking notes, indicating when the actor playing the knight should stand or sit or cross the stage. Looking at the other scripts, Lily found the same was true for all of them, though for the witch Amata and the White Worm respectively.

“Are they staging a play?” Lily asked in utter bafflement.

“Maybe they thought it would be a funny joke for April Fool’s,” Will suggested.

“Only they didn’t stage it,” Lily countered.

The door flew open.

Lily screamed, clutching a hand to her chest. From the doorway, Duane and Khalid stared at them in
bewilderment. They looked from Lily to the scripts in her hand to Mei-Lin crouched over Sirius’s trunk to Will and back again.

“Now then,” Lily greeted. The vowels stretched long and tangled, sounding closer to “Naw theen” as her Midlands accent strengthened. Duane was from Rutland, and his presence always sent her slipping into old patterns, old dialects.

It took Khalid a beat to respond. “Alright.”

“You don’t happen to know where Sirius is? My boyfriend. Sirius,” Lily said. Their relationship was feeling like a pretty good alibi as the two Gryffindors loomed over her.

“No, but I think he’s around somewhere. He and his mates set off a Dungbomb earlier,” Duane said.

“Sounds like something they would do,” Mei-Lin said, nodding too vehemently.

They all remained in an absolute stand-still. Any movement to leave, any indication to speak seemed hopeless. They were caught out and badly. Heat rose up Lily’s neck, and she scratched at it. It made her the first person to move in the room and broke the trance that had befallen them.

“Have an eventful April Fool’s?” Will asked, trying to break the tension.

In that moment, inspiration struck.

“It’s actually great you guys are here because maybe you can help us,” Lily said unexpectedly. She pretended not to feel Mei-Lin and Will’s eyes staring her down in astonishment.

“Help you with what?” Duane asked.

“Our April Fool’s prank, of course! Why else would we be in here? Don’t you think it’s about time someone got the Marauders back?” Lily asked gaily.

She was an absolute bloody genius. Her excuse worked like a charm, and Khalid and Duane entered the room fully, all smiles at the prospect. Spur of the moment, Lily explained that they hadn’t been planning anything too creative, just short-sheeting the beds.

“And, we were going to charm their textbooks, so that the covers swap. That way, when they go to class tomorrow, they’ll have all the wrong books,” Will added in his own flash of brilliance, covering the fact that they’d been rooting through the trunks.

“They’ll be furious that someone got them for once,” Duane said. He smiled widely. “I’m totally in.”

“Let’s wreck them,” Khalid agreed.

For the next half-hour, the five unlikely coconspirators did just that. No one was more enthusiastic than Duane, motivated by the promise of payback. As they went about their business, chattering and giggling away, Lily could barely keep a frown off her face. It had been a busy day of discoveries – kelp, Merman, absences, patronuses, and plays – but it didn’t excite her.

After they finished booby-trapping the room, the three interlopers left for the safety of the common room, whispering about everything they’d learned as they went and celebrating their masterful navigation of the boys’ interruption. Will was bursting with a million theories, Mei-Lin with a million next-steps, but Lily was lost, confused. She couldn’t shake the gnawing nibbles of failure, knowing that none of this made a lick of bloody sense.
But then again, before every answer, you had to define the question. Lily now had several.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the abrupt ending – my weakness. So…very little James. Don’t kill me. Whole lotta James next chapter though! Just spilling over with James. And I’ll post it sometime in May, too because I continue to feel guilty. Almost all the events in this chapter did not exist a month ago, but I wasn’t happy with the pacing of some clues and what not, and ended up writing this in a fever haze over the course of two days, which is why James got pushed aside yet again.

Feeling pretty damn good about this story right now because I just finished chapter 12 today – needs massive reedits, but it’s at least a draft. That chapter’s been torturing me for nearly 4 whole months now, and I’m so glad to be past it. I think the writing’s going to start flowing much more easily from here, and that can only bode well for my update schedule.

A thank you again to Corinaj, who is masterful in her deployment of commas when editing this.

I love a good review, so don’t be stingy lol. And happy almost-here Monday!
The Prank

Chapter Notes

Everyone join me in celebrating the triumphant return of James Potter!! Not every one of the nearly 12,000 words in this chapter includes James, but boy is it close. Also, I almost named this chapter The Fish, for reasons that should become very apparent, very fast.

Thank you to Corina for beta’ing. There are 2 paragraphs in here she didn’t look at, so if there are mistakes at some point, assume it’s entirely on me and not her because she is an error-proofing genius. (It’s also feels like it’s been 75 years since I read this chapter through, so I half don’t know what’s in here…busy on chapter 14 rn.)

From what I can remember, I’m pretty fond of this one though, so review & let me know what ya’ll think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Petunia had never been popular, but she hadn’t been entirely alienated like Lily, didn’t wear the mark of magic and the freakshow quite so boldly on her chest. In their quiet neighborhood of rowhouses – lower middle-class but respectable for a wrung-out town of industry like Cokeworth, a neighborhood of pretensions – Petunia had been friends with the Sherries, twin girls who lived three houses over. Normally, they couldn’t be bothered to include Lily in their games, but on the rare occasion where they needed to split into partners, Lily would be invited into their home. Every unit of the rowhouses was built with the same dimensions, same rooms, so Lily could have navigated their home in the dark. With the lights on, however, their homes were incomparable. The Sherries collected useless bric-a-brac: statues of elephants clustered on the mantle, decorative plates stacked atop one another teetered precariously on the shelves, months-old catalogues never thrown out laid like a smear on the kitchen table. Lily would sometimes lie in bed, sweat-slick, worrying about what would happen if all that useless junk fell on top of her at once, whether she might drown in the sea of trash that the Sherries collected so proudly.

Pushing past her fear and entering the Sherries’ den of knickknacks was always rewarding because they housed one item that fascinated Lily endlessly. Right next to the telly, and twice as large, sat their fish tank. Through the glass, Lily would watch a swarm of colors that she took for granted in everyday life; reds and blues and purples that meant nothing to her on the telly took on the quality of the miraculous when submerged in water. Life wasn’t meant to be so colorful.

Despite their exotic coloring, the fish lived frightfully dull lives. They swam back and forth all day with no stimuli or adventure. On one visit, Lily had opened the top, peeking every which way to guarantee Petunia wasn’t about to catch her out in the act, and dropped in a fist-sized stone, filched from their postage-stamp of a front-yard. She plopped the rock right in the middle of the tank, where the fish were sure to see it. It was the largest disruption to their day, and Lily watched curiously as the fish swam around the rock, buzzed about it with the curiosity that had been so sorely lacking from their lives.

But then they stopped. Within minutes, the fish no longer cared about the alien stone that had been dropped from the sky to upend their lives. Like an airplane on a flightpath, they returned to their
regular, scheduled swimming. They adapted.

A week had passed since Lily and Sirius began dating and, like the fish, the school had snapped back from their surprise. No one was gossiping about Lily and Sirius anymore. What was once strange was now fact, and they had all adapted. Even James.

Sitting outside on a particularly sunny Saturday, this point was driven home again. Lily’s impromptu April Fool’s Day prank had reminded Sirius that couples spent time together, and he’d been seeking Lily out every day since, making plans to eat meals together or walking her to classes. They still spent plenty of time apart, but Lily felt like things were progressing in the necessary direction. All week, however, Sirius had kept her far from his mates. They’d all made up, like Sirius claimed, but there was still a tension that simmered below the surface, and Sirius was diligent in keeping Lily far away from it. The weekend was a different animal, though, so Sirius had invited Lily to join him and James on the lawn.

James had been trying to teach Sirius how to juggle for the last forty minutes. Armed with an orange, a stolen snitch, and a Remembrall, Sirius fumbled about. He’d dropped the Remembrall so many times now that it was cracked and leaking red fumes. Every time Sirius failed to make a catch, James rolled about with laughter.

Lily sat within arm’s distance, struggling through a stack of correspondence. She’d barely written half a paragraph because the spectacle before her kept stealing her attention.

Sirius started to gain a rhythm with his juggling: one pass, two pass. The Remembrall landed solidly in his hand. Then, James made a joke about pixie wrestling tournaments, and Sirius laughed so hard that the orange went flying, slipping through his fingers to roll down the hill.

“You know there are children starving in the world,” Lily said, gesturing to the wasted orange and channeling the energy of a million disapproving and cliché-loving mums

“Yeah, Padfoot, think of the children,” James teased.

“I’d rather think of summer ‘hols,” Sirius said, affecting boredom. He didn’t convince anyone. As far as Lily could tell, Sirius was never bored with James around.

“What are you planning this summer?” Lily asked.

Sirius considered. “I think I’d like to go to Tuscany, sample some Sangiovese. Do you think your parents would send us, James?”

“I’m not sure my parents would want to fund your romantic adventures,” James said, tone withering.

Things may have returned to normal, broadly speaking, but Lily believed the symptoms may have improved but the wound was far from healed. Lily knew her own part in the play of tension: liar, undercover, madly fancies the best friend. The drama between Sirius and James, however, continued to run on unexplained, and she’d bet her journalistic reputation that she wasn’t the principal source of whatever argument was driving the two of them to take passive-aggressive bites at one another whenever they could.

“Don’t be dense,” Sirius said. “I meant you and I should go to Tuscany. There’s bound to be sport there to keep you busy, and I’ll be so wine-drunk that I’ll only need entertaining after the sun goes down.”

“Not hard to keep you entertained, Pads. Here, go fetch,” James laughed as he tossed the snitch over Sirius’s shoulder.
The snitch accidentally pelted a second-year Slytherin who was sitting further down the hill. He turned to glare up at them, and Lily sent her most apologetic smile his way. Neither Sirius nor James spared the boy more than a glance, opting instead to stare into each other’s eyes, like destined lovers, and both snitch and orange laid abandoned.

“What about you, darling –” Sirius had taken to calling her darling in such a way that it never felt like an endearment, so that she nearly wondered whether she was being insulted, “–what do you get up to in your muggle town during the summer?”

“I was thinking of pressing butterflies this summer,” Lily announced. The idea had only occurred to her the day before, and she’d given it barely a thought, but she said it with a certainty that breathed truth into it.

“Butterflies?” Sirius said.

“Yes, a few summers ago, I did a project where I catalogued bird in the area and compared them to the local encyclopedia on animal life. Maybe I could do the same but with butterflies, press them into a work journal,” Lily said eagerly. “Or do you think it’s too girly to focus on just butterflies? Like I’m afraid of real insects? I could do all of them, I suppose, though there are thousands in the area…”

Crickets played her to sleep at night with their sweet song. Worms stretched out, sluggish and suicidal, on the pavement after a morning’s rain. Ladybugs crawled and flew in quick succession as they whirled away their short lives. Spiders were always slipping through the cracks in the backdoor, showing up in the shower to surprise Petunia at her most vulnerable or leaving their little love bites on the Evans’ sleeping arms, leaving them pockmarked come morning. Down by the river, there were lightning-fast dragonflies and gnats that swarmed so thick together that passerby could hardly see a meter in front of them. Industrious ants and fluttering butterflies and bottom-heavy bumblebees. What Lily loved most about these little projects was it brought into sharp relief her own narrowed perspective; the world was so much bigger than she ever fully acknowledged.

Evidently fascinated with the movement of the clouds, James didn’t look at her as she babbled about termites and centipedes and everything else that could crawl and fly in her dear hometown.

“Well…no one can say you’re not original,” Sirius said after a helpless moment’s silence.

Sirius didn’t let his inability to understand her hamper him for long. Confident, he slung an arm around her shoulders and dragged her into his body. Lily lost her balance and toppled half into his lap, a hand splayed on his chest and the other clawing at the grass. He thought she was adorable like that, flicking her nose and then kissing her lightly on the lips.

“If you want me to go…?” James said.

“Hardly,” Sirius boomed.

The whole morning, Sirius had adopted a Patrician tone to sustain himself. Sirius often did that: created a character, so that every word out of his mouth became a joke, and each one not at all funny. Ironically, with each of these false personas, Lily thought she discovered something altogether new and entirely true about Sirius. Today, she’d decided he was every bit the blue-blooded snob that he pretended.

Sirius continued, “Lily, here, will just have to learn to keep her hands off me. There’s a time and place for these things.”

“Yes, because that has definitely been a problem,” Lily dead-panned.
James laughed at her straight face. Lily righted herself so that she and Sirius were no longer touching. Dirt had collected on her trousers, and she breathed vigorously.

“I’ve never left the country,” Lily said, then. Something in the way they’d so casually thrown about the prospect of travel dragged the admission from her.

“You’re lying,” Sirius said as if such a thing was impossible.

“No...I’ve only ever been here, to Scotland, and England. Where have you been?” Lily asked.

Sirius waved a hand like the particulars didn’t matter, “Everywhere and nowhere. My family liked to holiday, but we never actually saw the places we went. There’s shockingly little different about a rented house in France compared to a rented house in Gambia when you spend the entire holiday inside it.”

“My parents haven’t travelled all that much since I was born, so mostly just other places in Europe. Travelling in magical communities has become a lot stricter the past couple of years because of the discontent. They don’t want rebellion to spread,” James said.

“A lot of countries already had draconian travel bans,” Sirius added, “the ones worst affected by Grindelwald. Getting into Germany’s a nightmare. You have to find like twelve letters of reference from German citizens, all willing to vouch in person at the Ministry if called upon. Switzerland’s become a fortress this year unless you can prove some tie to the land itself.”

“My mum was devastated. She loves the Alps and the food, but I promised I’d pop over regularly and bring her some souvenirs,” James said.

Lily frowned. “Why can you go if your mum can’t?”

“Oh, I was born there,” James said.

At Lily’s demand for an explanation, Sirius returned to his juggling, all too familiar with the tale. Still, Sirius couldn’t hide a fond smile when James launched into the retelling. James spoke like he’d rehearsed for years.

“The thing you have to understand about my parents is that my mum is always right and my dad knows it,” James began.

The year had been 1960 and Fleamont Potter’s always substantial devotion to his wife had been at peak levels as she rounded out the eighth month of her miracle, late-in-life pregnancy. On what James called “the grand day that will forever be remembered” – March 27, 1960 – Euphemia Potter had awoken with a craving, not for crisps or pickles dipped in chocolate, but for the chestnut puree dessert the Swiss had perfected, the vermicelle. And Euphemia Potter only ate vermicelle if it was baked by hand at her favorite patisserie in Schwyz, a shop so small and neglected it didn’t have a name. At her insistence, the couple had apparated to the spot where Euphemia Potter remembered last seeing her beloved bakery, only to find an empty building on a street that didn’t look remotely familiar. They’d spent the next hour scouring the town for acceptable vermicelle.

James laughed as he reached the conclusion, “Even as a fetus, I knew what I wanted, so after a very short and very sudden labor, I came bursting into the world on Swiss soil. True story.”

It may have been true, but everything about the story struck Lily as surreal, that there were people who had favorite bakeries abroad and travelled on a whim. She was sure the correlation between income and the luxury of favorite Swiss pastries would prove strong.
Despondent over her lack of travel experience, Lily muttered, “Eat the rich.”

James laughed again.

It was the fourth time he’d laughed at something she said that morning. Lily was disgusted with herself for keeping count.

She was still so angry with him that it hurt. There were fingernail impressions in the dirt at her sides from where she’d gouge the earth whenever something he said reminded her of her humiliation. Staying actively angry with James was difficult, however, when he was being blithe and cheerful and telling stories about his family. The harsh things he’d said slipped to the back of her mind – and perhaps she was a little too happy to abandon those bad memories to the furthest recesses of her mental archives – and she was remembering the way he’d encourage her before their Transfiguration exams or take an interest in whatever she’d read the night before, the way he always supported the *Hogwarts Monthly Letter*.

Every month, James was the first person to buy a paper outside the newspaper staff. He’d wake up far earlier than Lily on a normal day to squeeze in some time on his broomstick before heading to breakfast. When she lumbered into the Great Hall with a stack of papers that eclipsed the crown of her head, he’d always dash over with a smile on his face and a few knuts jangling around in his hand. He’d never have time to talk because he was too excited to read the newest issue of the paper and would rush off to the farthest corner of the Gryffindor table to do just that. After reading it cover to cover, James would find her later that same day to chat about his favorite articles, debate biased coverage, and congratulate Lily on a job well done. During these conversations, Lily always felt like she was balancing on a tightrope because her heart was swooping about in her chest and she had to stay sharp and disciplined to keep up with him. It made her look forward to every turn of the month. Because they were cross with one another, they hadn’t discussed this month’s paper at all, and she missed it.

“Hey, so you never told me where you disappeared Wednesday,” Lily addressed Sirius lightly. She lay back on the grass and lifted her legs in the air, crossing her ankles and keeping her gaze purposefully trained on her shoes.

So far, dating Sirius had been at times fun and at times stressful, but always frustrating. He’d given her nothing. She’d learned far more about Sirius’s opinions on men’s footwear than on the organization she wished to infiltrate. April Fools had ended with nary a prank from the Marauders, and Sirius had ignored every one of the curious hints Lily had dropped on the matter. It was time for the direct approach.

“We just went into town, played hooky for the day,” Sirius shrugged.

“On April Fools?” Lily said skeptically.

James smiled. “We figured we ought to share the love a bit this year. I’m pretty sure Madame Rosmerta will never be the same after the scare we gave her. Bloody brilliant work on our part.”

They were excellent liars. Lily pulled out her ever-handly notebook and pretended to doodle a rainbow in the margins. Once she was sure that neither of the boys were looking, she wrote a quick note to herself:

*Get attendance records from the professors for Thursday, April 1. Who else wasn’t in class?*

“What are you scribbling over there, anyway?” Sirius said. It was the last question Lily wanted to
hear, and she ruffled through the heap of papers in her lap, like the illusion of business would throw him off the scent. “How many centimeters of parchment did Binns ask for? You look like you’re writing a novel.”

“More like an encyclopedia,” James muttered.

True enough, Lily was buried under mounds of parchment and muggle-style paper. She’d charmed it down so a passing breeze wouldn’t send everything flying because she’d never owned a paperweight in her life; paperweights for wealthy berks like the two boys interrogating her.

“This isn’t homework,” Lily corrected. “They’re letters.”

“Should I be jealous of your apparently prolific pen pal?” Sirius asked. “Tell me he’s not as handsome as me.”

Lily doubted Sirius would have minded if she revealed she was writing to one hundred different men, all models, and all her lovers.

Lily motioned to the letter on her lap, which had commanded half her focus for the last twenty minutes, “Well, Lucy Parker’s only twelve-years-old and lives in Kent. You can be jealous, but I’ll judge you for it.”

With her waved permission, James rifled through a few of the letters she’d already finished. They were a mix of letters she’d received from others and her carefully drafted responses. While he scanned the letters’ contents, Lily explained her role as pen pal.

The Leicester Infirmary Hospital ran a volunteer letter writing program. They’d share names of hospice patients with their volunteers, who would write letters to the dying and the bereaved loved ones they left behind. Lily understood all too well the loneliness that enclosed around the families and had been an enthusiastic participant in the program since she was eleven-years-old. Sometimes, she felt as if it was less charity than consolation for herself as there was a luxurious comfort to writing her scraped-bare feelings to a stranger that could understand perfectly. Her specialty was children of cancer patients, and the hospital always recommended Lily to the eight to eighteen set.

“How many of these do you write?” James asked, still flipping through her correspondence.

“It depends. People tend to fall off after a few weeks’ distance from the funeral…I’d say I have about seven or eight people who I’m actively writing at the moment, but I only have three regulars.”

Deidre Howard was Lily’s longest pen pal. Deidre was a year younger and an orphan. Her father had lost his life to pancreatic cancer, her mother to heroin before Deidre was old enough to talk. They’d been writing back-and-forth for five years: two letters each a month for a total of 240 letters. Some were short missives when their lives were chaotic and attention scarce, but other letters filled page after page in cramped lettering as they obsessed over the past and confessed their wildest hopes for the future. The two girls would never meet – would never want to after the heart-pulsing admissions they’d put to paper – but they were compatriots nonetheless in a world that sent “Get Better Soon” cards, like the soon wasn’t an impossibility, an insult. The bereaved continued to long after the rest of the world thought it time to move on.

“How do you keep them all straight?” Sirius asked.

“It’s difficult. I’m not going to lie,” Lily admitted. “That’s why I save all of my letters through the week and try to finish my responses all at once on the weekend. It’s easier to sort through everything at once.”
James smiled enigmatically at the letter in his hands and then at her. “Well, now I feel guilty for
distracting you. I thought you were doing something unimportant. Like homework.”

Lily rolled her eyes. They both knew full well that Lily failed to hand in thrice as many assignments
as James. After that, James and Sirius chatted about their Quidditch prospects, everything statelier
and less likely to draw attention. She liked Quidditch, but in an abstract way, which freed her to pay
attention to her pen pals. Sometimes, she felt guilty while writing to them, knowing that half were in
the depths of their greatest nightmare and meanwhile she was sitting in the sunshine, almost
recovered, on the other side. With the pleasant sound of James and Sirius bantering in her ear, she
felt it more acutely than ever.

She nearly leapt out of her skin when a hand glided past the shell of her ear. It wasn’t Sirius’s either.
Looking only semi-apologetic, James held up a leaf that had caught in her hair. They’d long stopped
discussing Quidditch.

“Thanks,” Lily murmured quietly, hyper-aware that Sirius was watching.

“Anytime,” James promised.

His words, imbued with all the solemnity of a vow, guaranteed more than a promise to always pluck
leaves out of her hair. The day had been a trial in James coming to terms with her relationship with
Sirius, and she’d passed. There would be no more slammed books or half-biting comments. She had
James Potter’s approval.

She was officially Sirius Black’s girlfriend.

Hunting down the professors on a Sunday was always a crapshoot. They all disappeared on their
days off, sleeping in late or carrying on in Hogsmeade with the townsfolk. At seven AM, long before
the castle had risen for breakfast or the sun had risen from its long sleep, however, Lily knew that
Professor Bukhari could be found making Salaat in his office.

She waited outside for fifteen minutes or until she was sure that he’d have finished before knocking
on the door. The Arithmancy professor poked his head out, surprised in equal measure to see
someone looking for a meeting so early on a Sunday and that it was the girl who had dropped
arithmancy halfway through third-year. He ushered her into his office despite his surprise,
encouraging her to sit down. His prayer rug lay unfolded in the corner by the window.

“Sorry to bother you so early professor, but I’m working on an assignment for the Head Boy. He
asked that I gather up the attendance records for the last week,” Lily lied smoothly.

Professor Bukhari pulled an enormous book of looseleaf parchment from his desk, flipping through it
searchingly. “Any specific year you’re looking for?”

Here, Lily paused. Technically, she only wanted to know if any of the sixth-or seventh-year students
had gone missing on Thursday, but she didn’t want to leave any trace of her investigation. Better to
keep the search broad and, then, narrow in herself.

“All years,” Lily said, “though, if it helps, I’m looking for the attendance more specifically for the
end of last week.”

Not the most organized of the professors, it took Professor Bukhari several minutes to unearth all his
attendance records. He found different years haphazardly, passing them along to Lily for her review.
Her quick scan of the seventh-years found no one missing from his class.
Finally, he gave her the sixth-year attendance records, and Lily’s eyebrows flew above her hairline. “This says there were no absences last week!”

“That would be correct. As you well know, Miss Evans, Arithmancy is a difficult subject, and sixth-year becomes especially harrowing. It’s very rare for someone to miss a class.”

James took Arithmancy, and his name was there in blue ink, a check box next to each date of the week to signal that he’d attended class. And, it couldn’t be right. Will took Arithmancy as well, and he’d confirmed that James had been missing that day.

“Are you sure?” Lily asked. “I mean, I’d heard that James Potter wasn’t in class on Thursday. Is it possible that you mistakenly marked him here?”

Professor Bukhari shook his head. “I am meticulous about attendance, Miss Evans, and I remember the day well. Mr. Potter arrived on time, answered all of my questions, and turned in a highly acceptable assignment on number theory during a full moon.”

The theme song from The Twilight Zone began to play in her head.

Trooping down to breakfast with Mei-Lin at the much more acceptable hour of nine, Lily obsessed over the possibilities. Lily didn’t question Will’s report on James’ absence for a second, so James must have found a way to fool Professor Bukhari, but how…? Memory alteration? Polyjuice potion? A powerful Confundus?

She intended to repeat the exercise with all of the school’s professors, but she already knew it would be futile. Lily fully expected every professor to present a perfect attendance record for Thursday’s missing Grindylows.

“You’re good to help me with my article today, right?” Mei-Lin asked as they settled in to eat.

Lily nearly choked on a sausage link as she blinked in surprise. A taste of pepper caught in her throat, just an irritant tickling at her flesh, so she guzzled her entire glass of pumpkin juice to alleviate it.

“You forgot, didn’t you?” Mei-Lin sighed.

“Of course not,” Lily said, far too bright to be convincing.

Excited about her new assignment to test the number of calories burnt in various muggle sports, Mei-Lin had begged Lily to carve out a few hours to help. Distractedly, Lily had agreed, though if she’d stopped to think, she would have lamented how there were hardly enough hours in the day for bogus experiments. Mei-Lin couldn’t play football by herself, though, so Lily couldn’t gracefully bow out.

“We can check tennis off pretty quickly, all things considered,” Mei-Lin said, ticking off the sport on her thumb, “then, I have a football, everything we need for cricket, rugby, and field hockey.”

“We’re not going to have much luck playing half these with only two people,” Lily pointed out.

“It doesn’t have to be perfect, just an imitation. Do you think we should add netball and squash to the list?” Mei-Lin mused.

The bench shifted beneath Lily as the Marauders arrived for dinner. Lily was crowded between Sirius and Peter. Mei-Lin looked alarmed to be in the same position between Remus and James. Not as disturbed as Lily, however, who found herself, once again, face-to-face with James.
“Squash isn’t in season yet,” Sirius told Mei-Lin.

“She means the sport,” Remus snorted.

“Never heard of it.”

Effectively shut down, Mei-Lin fumed to herself. There was no room for genuine conversation as the boys took their breakfast. Everything was a flurry of masculine activity. No plate could be piled high enough. Additional food was reached for, arms crossing and forks clanging, even as they chewed on their current dish. Discretely, Lily shifted closer to Sirius to avoid Peter and his habit of throwing elbows. Sirius slung an arm around her waist.

Peter dominated the talk, detailing a vivid dream of being hunted by a herd of elk in New Forest. Goading him on with questions, Sirius and Remus kept the tale alive. Lily didn’t much care – she didn’t hold with the soft Freudian pseudo-science around dreams – and neither it seemed, did James, eyes closed and conversation slipping right over head.

“Were you in Arithmancy last Thursday?” Lily asked abruptly before her brain could catch up to her mouth and advise caution.

Still half asleep, James looked groggy behind his glasses as he answered, “Wuzzat?”

“Last Thursday, were you in Arithmancy? Will says you weren’t,” Lily said.

“Skipped,” James said simply.

Her line of questioning didn’t interest him enough to arouse his suspicions, though they confirmed hers.

Not seeing a way to contribute meaningfully to the babble at the table, Lily and Mei-Lin were mostly silent throughout breakfast. Lily didn’t mind as her thoughts were far away, chasing after theories and uncovering secrets.

Mei-Lin minded, of course. Everything about these coarse, ill-refined boys was designed to torment Mei-Lin’s sensibilities. She was sensitive to matters of personal space and manners, always making herself small, always polite and considerate. Meanwhile, the Marauders, excepting Sirius, had never met a rule of etiquette they didn’t despise. Unaware of the storm of resentment brewing inside their fellow Gryffindor, Remus plucked food directly off Mei-Lin’s plate: unforgivable. James cut her off mid-sentence: appalling. Peter chewed his granola with his front teeth, every bite an audible chomp from across the table: despicable.

The mail arrived toward the end of their meal. Knowing about Sirius’s allergies, Lily giggled at the subtle way Sirius leaned away from a barn owl that set down beside a group of third years. She taunted him with a fallen feather, floating the thing just beneath his nose, until he was stumbling away and she was chortling.

James’ owl landed gracefully, giving Sirius a wide berth; well-trained. It was a sizeable great grey owl with a mean face, not its fault, Lily supposed, as the close-set eyes of the breed lent a menacing quality to what was surely a kind animal. It carried a package of raspberries, carefully wrapped and prepared by the Potters for their spoiled son.

A little brown owl stopped before Lily. She did some mental maths and came up short; all of her pen pals had already written, and she didn’t expect another letter from Petunia so soon. Her father never wrote. The owl extended its leg, the gesture still so adorable to Lily – who had never recovered from the owl as mail service concept – that she had to stop and pet it for several minutes. The owl preened.
When she removed the letter, she saw it was yet another note from Petunia. Watching Petunia send
post by owl was an honor Lily would pay to have. She’d taught Petunia how to write her at
Hogwarts the summer between her first and second years. Easily frightened, Petunia had streaked
through the living room to escape the owl, bellowing every time it gently pecked her fingers as if the
digit had been amputated, cowering beneath furniture. The sweet school owl had thought they were
playing a game and only chased her all the more enthusiastically.

Petunia had eventually mastered the practice. For muggleborn students, sending mail was
institutionally inconvenient. When Petunia wanted to send a letter, she had to send – by regular post
– a request to an office in Reading and then wait for an owl to arrive for her letter. The process took
six days in total. While Petunia resented the whole practice, she continued to send her monthly letters
all the same.

Curious, Lily scanned the letter from Petunia, mood souring as she read. Nothing interesting to
report, which wasn’t surprising as she’d written just the week before. Her sister had landed an
assistant position at a local firm for the summer. The position would pay a whole three pounds, well
over the minimum salary. Petunia wasn’t writing to brag, though she spent the whole of the body of
her letter doing just that. No, Petunia was writing to ask whether Lily had put any thought into where
she’d work that summer, a flowery reminder that a summer of lying about wouldn’t be tolerated.

The best summer jobs were always snapped up well before Lily returned from term, so Petunia
would choose and apply for her. They’d had a nasty row the year before because Petunia had signed
Lily up for an awful job mopping floors at the local pub.

And to think James and Sirius were planning to travel to Italy that summer.

Lily hastily scribbled out a response, listing out the range of positions that would be acceptable:

1. Anything outside
2. Butcher shop
3. Research assistant (does this even exist in Cokeworth?)
4. Bakery, kitchen work –not at the counter
5. Retail, I suppose…(to be avoided if possible!!!)

NO, I REPEAT, NO PUB WORK!!!!

The owl pecked impatiently at Lily’s fingers as she wrote, desperate to return to the owlery for a
meal before it had to take to the skies once more. It wasn’t the only one waiting for Lily to finish her
letter writing. Sirius had unwound a strand of hair from her ponytail and gave it a few painless tugs
to get her attention. Busy with her letter, Lily held up a finger to indicate she wouldn’t be interrupted.
She rolled up her scrap of parchment and tied it to the owl’s offered leg with a neat, looping bow.
The owl gave her one last nip, this time playful, before it flew away.

Now, Lily turned her attention to Sirius, who had just eaten the last scoop of oatmeal from his plate.
New waves of students – the later, Sunday brunch crowd – were pouring through the double doors.
As Sirius’s plate vanished from the table, it was replaced with a brand-new stack of pancakes.

“Spend the day with me,” Sirius urged. He was being sweet that morning, and the way his bangs fell
over his eyes made him look like a dog, shaggy and plaintive.

Lily hesitated, “I promised I’d help Mei-Lin with something…”

“Fantastic. The more help the better, right?” Sirius said.
From over his shoulder, Lily could see Mei-Lin frantically shaking her head. Lily grimaced, preparing to reject him, but then she paused. Mei-Lin may not particularly like Sirius, but her article would be much more accurate if they had more help. Besides Mei-Lin didn’t like anyone, so that hardly mattered.

“We could use a few more players for rugby,” Lily admitted, and Mei-Lin feigned collapsing onto the table.

“Fantastic! So tell me more about this rubby!”

“I hate you,” Mei-Lin groaned, her face pressed awkwardly against Lily’s outer thigh, so that Lily could feel the vibration of lips on skin.

“I hate me too, right now,” Lily agreed.

They were trapped in what felt like the millionth scrum of the day. Rugby was not meant to be tried with only eleven people, all cursed with a loose understanding of the rules of play, and Sirius would not stop passing the ball forward, trapping them in scrum after scrum.

The Marauders had leapt at the opportunity to learn a new sport, quickly roping in their housemate, Khalid, Constance Arnolds, and a kind Slytherin named Danyal (oxymoronic for sure, but she really did seem lovely). For her part, Mei-Lin had managed to hook Dorcas and Will. Dorcas had required bribery and a hefty delivery of guilt about deadlines and the health of the paper. Will had merely needed to be told that Remus would be playing. Predictable.

It mildly frustrated Lily that half the players weren’t bothering to adhere to the rules, but only because she viewed their game as an experiment. With Mei-Lin’s spell to measure their burnt calories ticking away, Lily wanted to simulate play as closely as possible, a feat that would never occur if Peter kept throwing the ball offsides every time he feared someone was going to tackle him.

No one was as irritated as Will, however. His competitive nature had been piqued, and he snarled orders at the members of his team: Sirius, Lily, Constance, Remus, and Khalid. By sheer force of personality, Will had become their impromptu captain. In a more obvious delineation of authority, James was leading the other side.

After far more elbowing than was strictly allowed, the scrum broke and everyone went running. Mei-Lin held the ball under the crook of her elbow. She was a natural athlete, lithe and ferocious plowing down the field. Will threw himself forward to block her, but Mei-Lin easily tossed the ball back into James waiting hands. There was no one who could stop him as he sprinted down field and scored a try.

Will tore a chunk of grass from the field – or rather the flat stretch of greenery by Hagrid’s hut – in his frustration. The teams were imbalanced. The only player on Lily’s team that could hope to compete with James was Khalid, but whenever he tried to manage James, Mei-Lin was there to steal the ball and score herself.

The score? A dismal 12 to 0.

Lily dropped to her knees, winded from all the running and shoving and grunting. Miserably, she groped at the fat of her belly. She needed to find time to exercise, or she’d never manage to climb Machu Picchu or become the third woman to scale Mt. Everest. (The honor of being first to take on Everest went to Junko Tabei, a veritable badass who spurned men who told her climbing wasn’t for
women, suffered an avalanche on the way out, blacking out for six minutes under the snow, and still managed to reach the peak.) Lily debated whether waking up at 5:30 in the morning to run the length of the grounds was excessive.

Seeing her on her knees, Will approached to berate her. The team gathered around obediently.

“Evans, my frail flower, you need to move your arse. Where were you on that last play? Mei-Lin ran circles around you! You can’t be afraid to get a little dirty,” Will barked. He bared his scraped elbows and knees as evidence of how he threw himself courageously at every opposing team member.

Lily diplomatically didn’t mention that he’d yet to successfully tackle anyone despite the bruises.

“And Constance, sweetheart, angel, you’re too bleeding nice!” Will yelled. “When you’re in the scrum, don’t be afraid to throw an elbow, to give a little bite. Whatever it takes!”

Unflappable, Constance gave her big-toothed grin, “I’ll try harder next time!”

Huffing, Will didn’t know what to do at this easy acceptance. He turned to Khalid, “Stay on Potter. Don’t get distracted by Mei-Lin. We’ll figure her out eventually, but you’re the only one who can slow him down. And Remus –” Will paused, “– you’re doing wonderfully, I wouldn’t change a thing. Just perfect.”

Lily squawked in outrage. “Blatant favoritism! I vote to impeach you!”

Blushing sweetly, Remus looked everywhere but at Will. “Um… I muddled that, what do you call it, ruck? I can manage better.”

“Don’t strain yourself. You’re in the Hospital Wing enough as it is,” Will ordered kindly.

“Whatever you say, Captain,” Remus said with a smile, and, if Lily wasn’t very much mistaken, a hint of flirtation in his voice. Captain indeed.

Losing only a second to linger over Remus’s coyness, Will spun around to narrow his eyes on Sirius. “And you! If you throw, kick, drop or headbutt that ball forward one more bloody time, I’m going to throw, kick, drop, and headbutt you into the Black Lake! Are we clear?”

Sirius called out to James, repeating what Will had said. Instantly, the two set to snickering about the prospect of sending a Black into the Black Lake. Looking to Remus accusingly, Lily awaited an explanation of just how he could be friends with such immature loons, but Remus only rubbed his eyes and sighed. They were incorrigible the lot of them. And stupid, Lily couldn’t forget stupid.

The game resumed not long after that with no better results. Khalid got a hold of the ball and kicked it forward – a former footballer – and looked about to score except James was coming up on him far faster than seemed humanly possible. Lily lost a second to reveling in thoughts about how fit James must look under his trousers to achieve that kind of speed.

That’s when she slipped – no excuse for it, the grass wasn’t even wet – and tumbled backward. Unpleasant as it was, falling on her arse was hardly the worst pain or humiliation in the world, so in the split-second left for thoughts, Lily resigned herself to her fate, a fate that never reached completion.

Lily found herself blinking up at the pure blue sky, but instead of an aching back and grass stains, she hovered, held up by the oh-so strong arms of James. Catching her fall in his peripheral, he’d managed a Herculean vault to the side, arms extended to cradle her. They looked like a romance
Lily tinted red and draped helplessly over his arm as he stared down at her. Her bosom was heaving.

“Watch yourself, Evans,” James said, mussing her hair and not even complaining at the try Khalid scored while he was busy helping her.

She was having heart palpitations, and they weren’t from over-exertion.

Then, there was a bit of an uproar over whether Will kneeing Dorcas in the groin constituted foul play. Will’s defense was that, sporting a vagina, Dorcas didn’t have anything there to kick. Constance had named herself the referee and tried to argue Will down even as he shrieked in her face.

Lily took the opportunity to get a drink. Their game had gathered a crowd, some of whom had been kind enough to bring flasks of water for the beleaguered players. Lily drank heartily and poured the remaining contents over her face. Beads of water dripped down the loose collar of her shirt and over the line of her sternum.

Beside her, Danyal Shafiq did the same. She looked like a model when she tossed her wet hair about. Unlike Mary MacDonald, Hogwarts’ other resident beauty queen, there was an imperfection to Danyal, something in her crooked smile and dusting of freckles that made her all the prettier. She had dark skin and even darker eyes and hair that lightened two shades under the sun.

A thought occurred to Lily, “Danyal, were you in class Thursday?”

“This last Thursday? Dunno…so many classes,” Danyal said.

“I heard you skipped,” Lily lied.

“Really? Don’t know why you care,” Danyal laughed. “I guess I might have skipped out. I don’t keep track of that kind of thing.”

Lily followed another thread, “Danyal, did you go out with James…to his party, I mean?”

“His party? You mean the Grindylows party? Yeah, we went together. I don’t see it happening again, though. He’s a great snog, but he spent one half of the party talking to his mates and the other half talking to other girls. You know how James is,” Danyal said.

Swallowing her bitterness, Lily concurred, “Yeah, I really do.”

By the time the game was finished, Lily’s shirt clung uncomfortably at the armpits and her tummy ached with a cramp that had lasted so long, it seemed to have laid down roots in her and set up shop for a permanent stay. She laid weakly on the lawn, arms and legs spread wide like she meant to carve a snow angel into the fallow dirt.

Lily didn’t mind sweat; perspiration equals perseverance equals a life well-lived. If she was a girl to glow red with embarrassment at the smallest hint of glandular secretion, she would have been spared by the sorry state of her company. According to Mei-Lin they’d burned an average of 421.5 calories during their match, and it showed. The sweat had the odd effect of transforming Sirius into the hero of a Victorian novel. He looked like a gentleman, wasting away prettily on his deathbed, lost to a swoon. Lily took special delight in noting that James didn’t look miraculously sexy with a coating of sweat. He looked beastly, like an animal on the verge of collapse under the hot rays of the sun.

With the mania of competition cleared from his mind, Will was making the rounds to apologize. (Dorcas had declined to accept hers.) He didn’t bother groveling to Lily or Mei-Lin, but spent an
inordinate time reassuring Remus that he was normally much better behaved.

“T’m normally much better behaved,” Will said.

“Don’t worry about it. I had fun,” Remus said.

“No, really! I don’t know what has me so wound up,” Will lamented.

Remus smiled. “Maybe I can help you out with that.”

Everyone did a collective spit take, his words teetering on the ledge between the safety of obliviousness and the free-fall of flirtation. Remus had never had a boyfriend, girlfriend, or anything in between as far as Lily was aware.

Bolder than Godric Gryffindor when it came to a boy, Will recovered quickly, “Well, you can always give me a massage later, then.”

Having used up all their calories from breakfast, most of the group wanted to return to the Great Hall for an early lunch. Lily’s cramp rather adamantly refused the invitation on her behalf. She was terribly behind on, well, just about everything, and she ought to busy herself with research for the next Potions Society meeting or, god forbid, homework.

Lily opened her eyes slowly, blinking against the blinding rays of the sun. She realized she hadn’t been left entirely alone; James sat nearby. His gross sweatiness wasn’t enough to counteract his appeal when he used the bottom of his shirt to wipe his face, give her a peek of ridged abdomen and dark hair.

“Aren’t you hungry?” Lily asked, aiming for friendly and landing somewhere in the territory of half-strangled antagonism.

“Quidditch diet,” James said.

Lily raised her eyebrows. While not exactly skinny, James was leaner than most Quidditch players. On first glance, people often mistook him for a seeker.

“Trying to lose weight?”

“No! No, nothing like that. No, I’m not skipping meals or eating less or anything like that. I’m eating five meals a day, just at specific times, trying to maximize the energy I get and bulk up a bit.”

“I can’t picture you bigger,” Lily mused.

Taking the cheap shot, James asked if she thought about his body a lot.

“You should see my Transfiguration notes. Just filled with doodles and compliments about your body. I’m right obsessed,” Lily said.

She was kidding, of course. She’d only sketched and salivated over his body in her Transfiguration notes once. James looked far too pleased with himself, given it was a joke, so she decided to change the subject.

“Did you…um, did you get a chance to read the Monthly Letter?” Lily asked. She wanted to remain unaffected but truthfully, she’d been desperate for the chance to talk with him about it all week. The paper just wasn’t the same without his insight.

James gave her a smile with lots of teeth. “I did.”
“And? What did you think?”

“I was none too happy with Huang’s assessment of Gryffindor’s chances for the Cup. Lane hasn’t been scared of the bludgers since getting out of the Hospital Wing,” James said.

The last Gryffindor match against Hufflepuff had ended with four of Gryffindor’s players restricted to the Hospital Wing, while Pomfrey set bones and monitored concussions. Peggy Lane had been injured the worst, walloped directly in the skull with a well-aimed bludger. The crack had echoed through the stands. The whole match, Lily had sat with a fist stuffed to her mouth, terrified that something would happen to knock James off his broom.

“Yes, but the Ravenclaw team is excellent, right? Mei-Lin’s not wrong about that. I’ve seen all their matches, and I swear their keeper is using divination or something because she always knows what direction the quaffle is going to go,” Lily said.

James sighed. “Yeah, Chopra is going to be a problem. That’s the thing about Ravenclaw, their chasers aren’t that impressive, but if Chopra can keep us from scoring the whole match until Curtis gets the snitch…well, then we’re done for. Granted, it works both ways. If we get the snitch first, we’ll take the Cup.”

“So that’s the plan? Capture the snitch before Ravenclaw?” Lily asked.

“That is top secret intel, Evans. I don’t even trust my mum with that information,” James said.

“Isn’t that, um, everyone’s strategy? To capture the snitch?”

“Yes,” James said, unapologetically. Then, “Your boy’s funny, too.”

“What?”

“Will. With the paper. His tone’s genuinely funny without being quippy or making fun of his subjects. There’s something about him in an interview, where he brings out the humor in whoever he’s talking to as well. I really liked his interview with Madame Rosmerta. He made her sound like a real person,” James explained.

“She is a real person.”

“Yeah, but she’s…how do I say this? When you see Rosmerta, just about all you see is this fit barmaid. You don’t see that she’s working at the Three Broomsticks to take care of her father while he recovers from Dragon Pox or that she speaks Polish and wants to learn Ukranian, too. I didn’t know any of that stuff about her until I read Will’s interview. He sees straight into people,” James said.

Lily beamed as if the praise had been aimed directly at her. Will’s reporting could cut straight to the humanity of a story about paint drying, always identifying how people would be impacted, how they saw the world.

They’d published a few opinion pieces written by various students as well, and Lily asked James what he thought about Scott McDougal’s opinion that the Ministry should inform communities when a werewolf moved into the area. A mandatory registry of werewolves already existed, but it was sealed from the public. McDougal and others argued that communities had the right to know when someone dangerous lived alongside them, that they might change their routines – bring their children indoors on the full moon or invest in a fence – if they were given notice.

James was shocking in his adamant refutation, sharing a few choice words about McDougal and his
ilk. Several times, James pointed his finger accusingly in Lily’s face, as if she was the one promoting
the idea. He spouted off several statistics about werewolves, the small percentage of werewolves that
ever attacked anyone, the pay gap between werewolves and the rest of the magical community, the
decreased life expectancy, which resulted from werewolves being alienated by the medical
community. Lily didn’t know anything about the issue – McDougal’s op-ed certainly hadn’t
mentioned these facts – and she wondered at how the library wasn’t just overflowing with books on
the subject. The only books she’d ever read about werewolves had focused on the ‘creature’ side –
the transformation, habits, and hunting of the werewolf – with nary a consideration for the person.
The wizarding world was woefully behind in the field of Social Sciences.

Unlike nearly everyone she knew, Lily couldn’t pluck opinions out of the sky. Sometimes, she
believed something instinctively, but if she couldn’t trace the rationale behind it, she was quick to put
her belief in a little box and seal it off from the world until she could do some research and build
something more stable. Severus was always keen on a debate, always prepared with a study or
statistic he’d happened upon in his reading. Mentioning something uncited in passing or any failure
to examine her premises could set him off into one of his tangents. He said he was merely
challenging her, using the Socratic Method. Lily called it irritating. Yet, maybe it had been for the
best because she was always careful to consider an issue before speaking on it, rarely stumbling into
the blunders her less-considered peers often made.

One of Lily’s favorite things about James Potter, up there with his devotion to his mates and soul-
depth passion for life, were his opinions. They were varied, loudly-spoken, and, above all, plentiful.
James had told her once that he held little debates in his head, arguing both sides back-and-forth
based on what he knew of the issue. The winner became his opinion. He could still change his mind
if new information was presented to him, but he wasn’t going to be wrapped up in rhetoric, the
rearrangement of an argument. He was confident in what he believed. In this case, he believed, nay,
knew that werewolves deserved protection from wizards and not the other way around.

“I think you’re right,” Lily said placatingly. “Seems to me that parents shouldn’t let their children be
wandering around outside on a full moon in the first place. I mean, werewolves can drive, err,
apparate, and the danger would exist regardless. So, if you did fear the rare aggressive one, knowing
about him…or her wouldn’t do you any good. Besides, when it is it ever a sign of positive change
when the government starts drawing up lists of marginalized citizens, hmm? Let me tell you, if the
Ministry asks me to put myself on a muggleborn list, I’m moving to Canada.”

“Why Canada?” Lily’s outrage had soothed James’ own and he was able to smile at her again.

“Because I only speak English, and I’d miss winters if I moved to Australia.”

“I’d move to Norway. I love dragons,” James said after a several moments of contemplation.

It had only been an op-ed, but Lily still felt irritated with Dorcas and the paper for publishing
McDougal’s bile. On first read, it had seemed reasonable enough. Werewolves were dangerous.
With the context that wizards treated werewolves like scum the 30 days of the month they were
perfectly human, however, Lily couldn’t help but feel the op-ed was something dangerous, dirty
instead.

“You should write a refutation for next month’s paper. Say all the things you said about werewolves
being mistreated, and we can publish it to give students the other side of the story. I think you have a
voice and something important to say. You should use it,” Lily suggested.

“Can I call McDougal a cowardly, cross-eyed cunt?” James asked.

“In Dorcas Meadowes’s beloved paper? You can try, but I can’t promise I’ll be able to protect you,”
Lily said.

James agreed to think about the idea. They settled into peaceful silence. A dog barked enthusiastically. Eastward from where they were sitting, Lily could see Hagrid marching across the grounds with Fang circling his heels. Lily rested a hand on her stomach, realizing that her cramp had finally gone away. She wasn’t sticky anymore either.

“This was fun,” James said, breaking their gentle silence. “No Quidditch, of course, but still entertaining. I can’t imagine this is the kind of fun you signed up for when you started up with Sirius, though.”

Wary at the dangerous turn the conversation had taken, Lily said, “What do you mean?”

“You wanted him to help you prove to Will and the rest of us that you’re a riot of fun, right? I don’t think sport accomplishes that.”

“And what would?” Lily asked, swallowing back her real question: Are you offering?

James pretended to think, tapping his chin. “A prank might do it.”

“And you just happen to have one in mind,” Lily said confidently.

“Yeah, I just might.”

James offered his hands, pulling her up from the grass with enough power that she floated in the air for half a second before her feet touched ground, which was a perfect equivalent to how Lily felt as she raced through the castle with James, like she was hovering outside the world of her classmates. Lily and James were no longer teenagers. They were naughty children, hearts pumping and exalted everywhere from their toes to their very souls at the prospect of mischief.

Having practically run the entire way, they arrived at the boys’ dormitory in no time. James ushered her into the loo, which was surreal for two reasons. First, Lily had never been in a washroom with a boy before. Second, the sixth-year Gryffindor boys’ loo was filled with fish. Truly, every surface was covered with containers, a different fish swimming the short stroke back and forth inside each. The fish filled the entire loo, resting on the sink, in the tub, on the lid of the toilet.

“Duane and Khalid are going to fall to their knees, they’ll be so grateful I got these out of here,” James said.

“How long have you had them in here?” Lily demanded.

“We’ve been fishing them out of the Black Lake, and I think we started that in, ugh, early March? So, about a month. Duane’s been jogging down to the prefect’s bath every morning. Says he can’t piss with all the eyes staring at him,” James chuckled.

“And what, pray tell, do you have planned for all these fish?” Lily asked.

The idea was simple and harmless: collect the fish, dump the fish in the prefects’ luxurious bath tub, swim with the fish, wait for discovery. James figured that pranking the prefects in their most private place was particularly daring, not because they were intimidating, but because it was a pointed middle finger to the establishment. James and Lily recognized no student authority over themselves, not today.

Together, James and Lily began to transport the fish to the prefects’ bathroom. There were too many fish to covertly transport in one trip, so they logged a significant workout, racing back and forth
between Gryffindor Tower and their destination on the fifth-floor. Smaller fish could be dropped into the pockets of their robes and the larger ones would be held close to their stomachs, so their robes took on a maternity-ish form. Each time they delivered the password to the baths, they peered dramatically around the corner for bathers who might catch them out.

When the task was done and the bath was overflowing with fish, James stripped to his underpants and jumped into the pool. He swam a perfect breaststroke, the kind practiced in the Olympic games, up the length of the bath and back. The natural waters of Cokeworth were polluted and the public pool reserved for those with the money to pay, so Lily was no great swimmer, but she waded in as well. After great consideration, she’d removed her jeans, relying on the fact that her flowy peasant blouse stretched nearly to her knees, where it clung modestly.

For maybe the first time, Lily and James were having fun together. They weren’t flirting or engaging in witty conversation. They were just swimming through a sea of disoriented fish, spitting water at each other’s faces when the impulse struck or trying to capture a grayling by the tail.

Unlike the colorful aquariums of Lily’s neighborhood adventures, there wasn’t much diversity to the fish James had collected. He was, after all, restricted to Scottish freshwater fish, so that meant pences, pollocks, one disturbingly large northern pike that Lily gave a wide berth and which they’d had to levitate to the baths because it was too heavy to carry, and far too many trout. And still, despite the dullness of their coloring, there was that glint of light off scales that spoke of vibrancy and life and sent a thrill pinging through her body.

“James,” Lily hummed after a time, curiosity overcoming her, “I know this is personal, so you can just tell me to shut up if you like, but...is there something going on between you and Sirius?”

“Me and Sirius?” James asked.

“Yes.”

It was hard to pinpoint how exactly James and Sirius were rowing because they continued to spend nearly all of their time together, but the signs were there. From Sirius, there were those startling jolts of meanness aimed at James that were entirely unprecedented. From James, there was a stoniness, an unforgiving cold front in the wake of Sirius’s blunders. They rarely bickered, and laughed more than they frowned, yet Lily was left with the unshakeable impression that something fundamental had shifted between them.

To his credit, James didn’t try to lie to her and cover up their row. He didn’t exactly burst with the unfiltered truth, but he didn’t owe that to her anyway. By all rights, it was Sirius who should be emotionally open with her, his girlfriend, not James.

It never occurred to Lily to ask Sirius.

“Yeah, we...we had a row, bit of a nasty one,” James said.

He kicked his feet slowly beneath him, each perfectly aimed to conserve energy and keep him afloat. The fish scattered at the decisive waves of water. In comparison, fish kept daringly approaching Lily to take delicate nibbles at her toes. The result was inappropriate laughter every thirty seconds, including at James’ admission.

“And you made up?” Lily asked through a giggle.

James’ forehead creased. “Not exactly. There wasn’t any point in arguing on and on forever. We both feel what we feel and think what we think. No changing that. So we’re mates and going to act
like it, but I wouldn’t say we made up.”

“That sounds impossible,” Lily said.

Despite her good fortune in friends now, Lily was all too familiar with what it meant to row with a dear friend, to lose one entirely. Sometimes Lily struggled to remember anything she accomplished in fifth year, any friendly chat or meaningful discovery, because everything was overwritten by the bold, all-caps screaming matches she’d have with Sev. An argument a day keeps the doctor away, their sickening motto.

Like James and Sirius, each of them had been intractable in their opinions, unwilling to budge for friendship, truth or honor. Without one’s convictions, one might as well die, Lily believed, but that didn’t make it any less lonely.

“So, you’re still angry with one another, still arguing, but you’re pretending you’re not because arguing constantly would be exhausting and you don’t want to stop spending time together,” Lily summarized.

“Yes, finally someone who gets it!” James said proudly.

“Can I ask why you’re fighting?” Lily said, knowing that he wouldn’t tell her before the question left her lips.

James puzzled over how to frame his non-answer. He floated alone at the other end of the bath. All of the fish had flocked to her like she was dropping bread crumbs in the water or something. The imagery of it was strange: Lily reigning like queen of the river fish over a lethargic army of brown and gray, while James was isolated, surrounded only by the pastel red and blue bubbles that had flooded the taps.

“Sirius did something wrong, a kind of betrayal of friendship,” James sounded out slowly.

“So, you’re arguing over the betrayal,” Lily said.

“You’d think so, but no. Sirius is sensitive. I’m not giving him a hard time about what he did, but that’s not enough for him. He wants me to say that I forgive him, and I just can’t. I can’t forgive him, and he claims that’s an even worse betrayal, so we’re rowing over that,” James finished lamely.

“Is he sorry?” Lily asked.

James sighed, “Probably…I mean, yes. Yes, he is.”

He fully expected her to demand that he forgive Sirius, but Lily couldn’t. How could she advocate forgiveness for a crime she didn’t know? Maybe Sirius ought to be shipped off to Azkaban for what he did! Maybe he’d murdered James’ great-uncle or something! Everyone could be redeemed, but not everyone could be forgiven.

She’d told Sirius that she could forgive, but talking with James was different. There was no impulse to hide the darkest parts of herself away because she intuited that James wouldn’t judge, would perhaps even understand the self-doubts that occasionally disturbed her. To Sirius, she could say she forgave easily, while to James, she could admit that she wasn’t sure whether she forgave anyone deep down. She loved Tuney despite her belligerence, her father despite his absence, but there was a knot in her heart that she feared would never unwind even long after they’d both gone from her life forever.

“I don’t know if I forgive easily either,” Lily said.
To Lily’s solemn admission, James snorted. “Hardly. You’re the most forgiving witch at this school.”

“No, I’m not! I have grudges, lots of them!”

“Against who?” James demanded.

Lily had to rack her brain for an answer. Other than Severus (and really that went without saying), she didn’t have any longstanding, articulated disagreements with anyone. Agreeing that James was right, however, wasn’t an option.

Triumphant, Lily landed on an answer and pointed her finger at him, “You! I have yet to forgive you!”

“Yeah, but you’ve forgiven me loads of times already,” James laughed. “You always do. Too bloody nice. We could have a screaming match when we were kids, and you’d be asking me to pass the salt ten minutes later, sweetest smile on your face.”

“Not this time, pal,” Lily said firmly. They could swim with the fishes and have a grand old time, but forgiveness was not in the equation for him. “Maybe if it was just…just the ‘no’ or just the –” Lily couldn’t even get it out. It was too mortifying to mention how he’d refused to speak to her alone or how he’d let Sirius take the mickey the whole time or his arrogant posture. All of it.

James cocked his head to the side as he looked at her. “What? You can tell me, Lily. Just spit it out.”

“It was that stupid fucking line about us getting married someday. It was so unbelievably entitled and rude. But no, it’s worse than that. Because I know you don’t actually fancy me, and you don’t actually believe what you were saying. You were just trying to come up with the cruelest thing you could possibly think of, and I don’t understand it. Fine, you didn’t want to go on a date with me. I’d misunderstood the signs, but I don’t see why you couldn’t have let me down gently! I would have done that for you!” Lily’s volume escalated steadily as she got through the humiliating retelling, so that tears pricked the inner corners of her eyes.

James eyes closed shut tight, and Lily might have assumed he was trying to block her out, if not for the fact that he started muttering ‘Merlin’ on repeat. The single word sounded horror-stricken.

“What?” Lily said. “What?”

“That line about the wedding… I was just quoting Docker. You know, The Gabled Hounds, the play? I could tell you were embarrassed about the whole thing, and you’re right, a lot of that was my fault. I knew I was being a prick – guess I was doing it on purpose even at the beginning– but then I felt bad. You should have seen your face! You just crumpled in on yourself, and I couldn’t go through with it! So, I figured I’d try to make you laugh, take some of the tension out of it,” James said, eyes still clenched shut.

“Docker, what?”

“The Gabled Hounds. Remember? The heart-warming story of a hag and her hound? The hag’s ex-boyfriend, you know, the vampire, said the marriage thing in the very first chapter? It’s the most famous line in the play. You read it a few years back and loved it, remember? I overheard you telling Snape that you’d all but memorized the bloody thing – said it gave you a whole new appreciation for
romance, which if I’m being honest, I found a bit weird. Not much romance from how I read it, but then again, I always say reading is a sacred communion between author and reader, so if you brought a different perspective to it, who am I to judge?” James said.

It was the closest to rambling disjointedly she’d ever seen him come. That was usually her territory. Waiting for her to recollect the story, James had opened his eyes again, so he was able to see her face morph through confusion straight to frustration.

Lily slapped a hand over her face. “The Gabriel Hounds, James. The Gabriel Hounds! It’s a muggle romance novel. By Mary Stewart! Just about one of the most important women novelists alive in England right now! I’ve no idea what The Gabled Hounds is, and I certainly can’t quote it!”

With distinct pleasure, Lily watched as James turned white as a sheet. It was a treat to see someone paler than herself for once. It didn’t last for more than a few seconds before his skin turned mottled purple, blood rising alongside his gorge.

“You’re telling me that you thought I just said that? That I said ‘We’re inevitable. You just have to be patient’ to you for real?” James whispered.

Lily nodded.

“You ought to have hexed me. Why’d you ever speak to me again after that?” James asked.

“A question I’ve still yet to answer. I might quit talking to you at any moment,” Lily said. “And I did dump pumpkin juice on your head if you recall.”

“Yeah, but I thought you did it because you didn’t want me to make you laugh,” James grumbled.

First thing Monday morning, Lily was submitting a proposal to Dumbledore. Purebloods ought to enroll in mandatory Muggle Studies classes over their summers to cut down on these absurdist mix-ups. The Gabled Hounds, honestly! Lily was too shocked to parse through the emotional implications of this, so she dove underneath the water as an excuse not to look at or listen to James any longer. She swam past his legs to the far side of the pool with her eyes wide open. It stung slightly, and she had to resist the urge to clamp them shut again. Her density – she never was much of a floater – brought her straight to the bottom of the pool and Lily sat there, intending never to resurface. It only lasted for a minute before her need for oxygen overcame her.

Lily splashed to the surface, greedily gulping for air. Her hair tangled unattractively about her neck in wet clumps. On the other side of the pool, James had yet to move, like he was waiting for her to think before trying to speak again. She had no intention of opening her mouth until her mind was properly sorted though, so his patience didn’t last long.

“I guess the line kind of does apply, even if it was meant as a joke. There’s a reason it came to mind in the moment,” James said, earning a suspicious glare from Lily. “I mean, if we did get married someday, I guarantee half the guests would talk about how they always knew it. We’re just too clever and good-looking for anything else.”

They were bantering like old times, that old talk she’d formerly taken as flirtation on his part. Even if he wasn’t flirting, Lily couldn’t resist sliding back into old habits. It was easier to joke than parse why she was still breathless now with her head decidedly above water.

“Oh, is this a spring wedding we’re having? Can we not invite your Uncle Teddy? You know how I hate when he’s been at the rum too long. He gets handsy – with himself, granted, which is better than with others, but it still makes for an upsetting party.”
James played along, swapping into the fantasy seamlessly. “Oh no, I’m afraid Uncle Teddy simply must come. I’ve asked him to serve as an usher. We can make him wear a pair of oven mitts, though. Make it hard for him to touch places he oughtn’t.”

“I don’t see why I ever agreed to marry you,” Lily said.

“Because I’m too—”

“Clever and attractive,” Lily answered for him. “Yeah, I remember.”

James broke like a cracked piggy bank, spilling over with laughter instead of knuts. Knowing that he hadn’t meant to humiliate her quite so terribly – only a little bit – Lily was able to see him clearly for the first time in a week. He was so bloody beautiful. Head tilted back and water flattening his overgrown mop of hair, he laughed and laughed, unaware of the way he affected her. Sirius was more conventionally attractive perhaps, but James was natural in a way that made her think of sunbaked earth and grapes from the vine and a thousand other simple pleasures of life.

Soberly, Lily forced herself to acknowledge a singularly hurtful truth: James may not have been the world’s greatest prat like she thought, but he’d still rejected her. She wasn’t actually too attractive and clever. He didn’t want her.

“I still don’t forgive you,” Lily confessed, bringing James’ laughter to a decided end.

It was beyond petty. Nancy Astor, England’s first female MP, had probably never held a rejected date against a bloke. It just wasn’t done amongst mature, sophisticated people. Lily, it turned out, was neither.

Unexpectedly, James swam toward her, and Lily stumbled backward into the wall lining the tub to introduce some space between them. He didn’t seem to notice or care. She was boxed in by him and his teasing grin. Water dripped from the tips of his hair down to his hard chest. He was close enough that when he treaded water, his knees would brush against her calves, both equally bare.

“You’re going to come to forgive me, Evans,” he said, voice deep.

“Not without an apology,” Lily breathed. He was staring directly into her eyes, hardly blinking, and in that moment she felt deceptively wanted.

Smirking, James shook his head, “I’ve never had to apologize to you before. That’s what I like so much about you. You’ll forgive me for that night, just like you’ll forgive me for this—”

Before Lily had time to process his ominous words, James had pulled the collar of her shirt away from her wet skin and dropped a slippery minnow straight down her blouse. The loose elastic snapped right back into place.

Lily screamed. She wasn’t afraid of fish, but there were few living creatures she’d invite to rub scales against her chest. Thrashing about just like the trapped fish, Lily lost herself to full-blown hysteria. In the midst of her wriggling, Lily all but missed when James spoke again.

“Just give it time, Evans. You’ll forgive me. You always do.”

Chapter End Notes
A/N: So question for the next chapter – my current chapter 9 is over 12,000 words long. Would you prefer 2 updates in June, where I split it in half? Or 1 update with the whole thing? Warning, James probably would only make it into 1 of the updates, not both, if I were to split it. Corina, who betas, has voted 1 chapter, so that’s 1 vote in favor of that. Just let me know if/when you review.

Also, if anyone’s confused by the Gabled Hounds thing, let me know. I was told it was confusing at first, so I edited, hoping for clarity. Not sure if I managed though, and am happy to explain if anyone needs it.

Thanks & hope everyone enjoys the rest of May!
The Professor

Chapter Notes

I always feel like I have a million things to say in these over the course of the month & then forget all of it...Thank you to Corina for your wonderful help beta'ing this story and making it more readable! Thank you to everyone who reads and reviews! This one's a bit later because I've been drowning in trying to sort out structural problems with chapter 10, but they've been resolved! And I'll have a new chapter up in July on schedule.

Dating was the world’s greatest time suck.

After Lily’s strangely intimate encounter with James, she would have preferred a little distance to set her head on straight, but the opportunity never presented itself. With James’ tacit approval of their relationship, Sirius had thrown open the doors to Lily, and she’d been seamlessly integrated into his day-to-day life, Lily expected to slot into his world with zero consideration of him doing the same with hers. More than a week had passed since the fish prank – the talk of the school after the Ravenclaw Quidditch team went for a post-workout soak, the water foaming and opaque, and found themselves unexpectedly sliding up against a school of lake-water fish – and Lily had spent more time with James than she had with her own thoughts.

Every part of her schedule was suffering for it. She’d had to skip Sunday’s meeting of the Astrological Society to hang out with the Marauders in the common room. Her Monday Charms essay had been illegible and sure to earn a failing mark. Her sleep schedule had tightened to a grisly four-and-a-half hours a night. She walked around the school like a zombie in the mornings, only making up for her zapped energy with a mid-morning nap in class.

Marlene’s loud blathering about her Grindylows knowledge only presented another demand on Lily’s time. The demonstration of inside knowledge had sent Marlene skyrocketing up Lily’s suspect list. The obvious course of action was to follow Marlene’s every move for clues. Trailing the Marauders had so far been a bust, but they were cunning and clever where Marlene was trusting and, well, dim. Unfortunately, Marlene’s schedule was nearly as frenetic as Lily’s, though she packed her hours with socializing rather than exploring the mysteries of the world. Unable to keep up, Lily had turned to her mates for help, and that was how Mei-in had earned the job of trailing Marlene whenever Lily was absent (read: constantly).

It had only been two days since Mei-Lin took on her new assignment, but she looked joyful at having escaped her charge for a few hours. They were in Defense for their last class before lunch, a subject that Marlene had dropped after her OWL. Mei-Lin was so grateful for the reprieve that she hadn’t even complained when Lily partnered with Sirius for the practical portion of the class, cheerfully joining Dorcas instead.

Lily smiled fondly at the image of Mei-Lin giggling at something Dorcas had said. It wasn’t easy for Mei-Lin to relax around people, people who never lived up to the expectations and dreams that Mei-Lin concocted in her never-resting head, and this comfort with Dorcas was well-fought for, practically new. Already, Lily missed her life from before, not the least of which because she was set to duel Sirius and he was probably going to slaughter her by mistake. Debacle after debacle yet her classmates still overestimated her abysmal defense skills.
As Sirius got into position, he managed a quick sip from the flask hidden in his robes.

Lily only saw the flash of hidden leather, but it was enough to have her hissing, “Don’t you dare! If you get blitzed and accidentally kill me, I’m going to haunt you for all eternity.”

“Sounds like a love story,” Sirius snickered. When Lily continued to glower, Sirius held up his flask in protest, “It’s water. See, sniff. No smell.”

“It’s vodka,” Lily said darkly. “Now put it away. I don’t want to die.”

She’d fallen for the vodka-water trick earlier that week. After a bite of potatoes went down the wrong pipe, Lily had been hacking her lungs up at the lunch table, bug-eyed and arms windmilling, like she was trying to fend off an attacker. Quick to help, Sirius had offered her his flask of “water.” Lily was so lucky to have such a sweet boyfriend. Lily had taken a substantial gulp of what was really vodka, and then set to sputtering anew, her unprepared throat seizing up and her gorge strongly protesting. Lily hadn’t tossed up the potatoes and vodka in Sirius’s face, though it had been a legitimate risk, and he’d howled like he’d never seen something so funny in his life.

Sirius was laughing heartily again now as he repocketed his flask. He was in a good mood that morning. The Clash had released a new album at the turn of the month, and, last night, Sirius had snuck down to Hogsmeade with his mates for a listen. There was a shop on the very edge of the village, Mallory’s Musical Mansion, that allowed students to play records – one sickle if you brought your own music, two to borrow from Mal’s expansive collection. Magic was banned on the premises to prevent interference with the record player, and it was a common sight to see Mal brandishing a griddle at neighbors who cast enchantments too close to her storefront and threatened her livelihood.

The album had left an impact. All morning, Sirius had been humming the heavy chords and strumming his fingers over his abdomen, like he was the lead bassist. Lily had incorrectly assumed it was an air guitar, and Sirius had been quick to correct her. Cheerfulness on Sirius was unnatural somehow, and the sight of him smiling pleasantly made Lily jittery, expecting a Levicorpus to send her flying into some elaborate trap at any moment.

“You know, I always thought you had some kind of secret death wish, but you’re shockingly stable,” Sirius said. He raised his wand.

“Me? A death wish?”

They exchanged a few half-hearted spells. It was a simple matter for both of them to just step to the side and evade every burst of color. He was going easy on her. Some girls would have been offended.

Lily could have kissed him for it.

“Sure. You’re a muggleborn who spent all her time with a Slytherin death eater git. You brew the most volatile potions, and you skip meals constantly. Plus, remember that enormous tree in Hogsmeade? I think you scaled it in what, third year? Why do it if the fear of falling didn’t turn you on?” Sirius said.

Lily was so stunned by his twisted evidence that she didn’t even snap at him for his highly illegal mention of Severus. The tree in question was a hundred-year-old oak that grew near the perimeter of the Hog’s Head. Its winding branches extended out over the rooves of the residents of Bread Crumb Way like a sheltering blanket. Lily had taken one look on her visit to Hogsmeade and known that she had to work her way to the very top. Her entire afternoon was lost to shimmying from one perch to another, nails digging with terror-induced strength into the wood and vertigo nipping at her senses.
But she hadn’t been driven by a perverse death wish. Peering through the thick foliage, Lily had looked out with awe over the landscape, eyes stretching for leagues before mountains impeded her view. She’d drunk in the sight, every bit as beautiful as the celebration within her as she basked in the accomplishment. Because that was what had led her to the tree. The intoxication of achieving something few or possibly no one else ever had.

Sirius’s perspective was rather sad, and Lily didn’t know how to clarify her motives to him. Instead, she said, “You’re lucky I don’t have a death wish because I have a full-proof way of convincing you to off me, and then, you’d be in Azkaban, so…”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yes, just picture it. You’ve just gotten your hands on the new Judas Priest album. You take it down to Mal’s for a listen, pop it in the record player, only to discover,” Lily paused dramatically, “that I’ve replaced it with KC and the Sunshine Band.”

“You villain!”

“Oh, yes! Nothing but disco for you. I’m sure you’d be shaking your booty in no time,” Lily teased.

Sirius grew very still, very suddenly. Like he was approaching a spooked horse, Sirius said in his smoothest voice, “Hey, Lily, what is your taste in music, anyway?”

It had only just occurred to Sirius that Lily came from muggles and would have her own opinions about their music. Possibly the wrong opinions.

Truthfully, Lily’s musical taste wasn’t particularly developed. She’d been a kid when she left home for school, still parroting her sister’s answers to the question and gagging over anything that let her strain out a high note in the car. Then, she’d been isolated from music at Hogwarts. Come summers, she’d only listen to Petunia’s collection of albums, and her sister was stingy, only buying a few per year. Lily was woefully behind and wouldn’t be surprised to learn Sirius had outstripped her.

“I don’t know. I like Abba. The Carpenters. Oh! Elton John writes such beautiful songs. David Bowie.”

Sirius alighted upon her final answer, repeating David Bowie to himself like a prayer, her only acceptable answer. As he murmured about Ziggy Stardust like a mad man, they continued their passive dance of spellcasting, never escalating and merely spinning a few degrees to the right to avoid a shivering charm or tickling spell.

“I think a bit of reeducation is in order,” Sirius announced. “Next Hogsmeade, I’ll take you to Mal’s, and we can get you acquainted with some real music.”

“Were you going to dump me if I said the Bee Gees?” Lily asked.

“Who knows what I would have done,” Sirius replied honestly.

In faux-outrage, Lily sent a quick succession of hexes his way, spread wide enough that he’d have to make use of a shield charm for once. They were still relatively simple spells and slow-moving, so Sirius had plenty of opportunity to raise his defenses. The start of a blue shield emerged, shimmering, from his wand, but then, it sputtered and died, like a candle flickering in the wind.

Lily’s level-six stinging hex collided directly with his chest. The follow-up spells Lily had cast before realizing his shields were failing soared into him as well, knocking him backwards into a row of
desks. Sirius toppled to the ground with a groan.

“Lily! Did you just beat Black?” Mei-Lin shouted from across the room.

Mei-Lin was like a proud parent at Lily’s success, and soon, she and Dorcas were clapping at her victory. Half the class joined in. Their professor even nodded her approval, looking surprised to the point of rudeness at Lily’s victory. Everyone was shocked by Lily’s sudden improvement; not least of all, Lily herself.

Once in a blue moon, Sirius would stroll into a session of the Dueling Club, hands in his pockets and posture relaxed. His casualness belied the truth: he was dangerous. All of the Marauders had their dueling strengths. Peter was ace with shields, Remus had an expansive knowledge of spells to utilize, James could move, sinuous and beautiful, and dodge just about anything sent his way, but Sirius! He fought instinctively, viciously, casting too fast to follow and wearing his opponent down to the edge of reason. Sirius’s spells moved faster, hit harder, and lasted longer. Some chalked it up to his heritage, murmuring out of earshot about how his family had raised him steeped in the sticky muck of dark magic, but Lily disagreed. She thought all that intensity was driven by rage and rage alone.

“I don’t understand what happened,” Lily said as she offered her hand to haul Sirius up off the floor. None of those spells should have hit you! You’d have blocked them, but your shield just…”

He didn’t accept her offer of help, as she might have expected from a seventeen-year-old bloke if she’d considered for a second. Instead, he leveraged one of the desks to return to his feet. The faintest blush of embarrassment colored his cheeks.

“New wand. Haven’t quite figured out how to work it yet. Good for offensive spells, but it only ever wants to attack,” Sirius said. He gestured to his unexpectedly stubby and rigid cedar wand.

“When did this happen? How?” Lily demanded.

“Dunno. Two weeks ago? Maybe three?” Sirius said casually, like replacing his wand was something he did on a monthly basis.

Two weeks ago they were already dating. Lily was flabbergasted that he hadn’t thought to mention it. When she asked now, Sirius hemmed about having sat on his wand and broken it in half.

Wandlore was one of Lily’s favorite magical subjects. The relationship between wizard and wand, the unity between physical and spiritual, had always intrigued her, so she knew a great deal about Sirius’s wand from a simple look. Unicorn hair meant he bought it from Ollivander’s (which made sense), a stable core useful for general magic. Cedar, on the other hand, was relatively rare outside the Americas. It was attracted to loyalty, fierceness, stubbornness.

It was also too short. A discrete, elegant wand worked well for discrete, elegant people. Sirius may house aspirations towards elegance, but he was too big a personality and needed a long wand to guide his flourishes. Lily couldn’t fathom how Ollivander let him walk out of the store with such an imperfect fit. The wandmaker had kept her in his shop for nearly three hours on her first visit to Diagon Alley before they settled upon a wand that actually suited her.

Maybe Ollivander had finally gone full-batty.

After class, Lily headed for a meeting of the newspaper, another of Will’s dreaded lunch meetings. Mei-Lin had darted off the moment their professor had dismissed class to scout for Marlene – the world’s most dedicated if unwilling spy – so Lily took her leave of Sirius and made her way alone.

She didn’t make it far before another set of feet fell into step with her own. Flat-heeled and still
several significant centimeters taller, Mary padded near-silently beside Lily. When Lily started at her unexpected companion, Mary gifted her with a measured smile.

“You’re not going to lunch?” Lily asked. They were walking in the opposite direction of the Great Hall.

“No, I have a question for my Runes professor. Thought we could walk together since you’re heading that way,” Mary replied.

It was simultaneously a very practical and very unlikely answer.

Mary unsettled Lily in a way that none of her other dormmates could. Mary was too withdrawn, able to remain silent for hours at a time, while everyone else couldn’t suffer the tyranny of silence for more than five minutes. They’d blab their darkest secrets, make a show of their most embarrassing foibles, while Mary kept preternaturally still, kept preternaturally mum. The only reason she didn’t blend in with the furniture was because her beauty threw her into stark contrast with the dull world of the inanimate. As a result, Mary always kept Lily guessing. There was nothing Lily loved more than a mystery, but she loathed the unsolvable.

So, Lily couldn’t begin to interpret Mary’s decision to walk alongside her to the Ancient Runes classrooms. Casual companionship or something more? Lily couldn’t tell. Nervous in the face of the unknown, Lily filled every minute of their walk with the kind of babble anathema to Mary’s very being.

And, because she was herself, Lily chose one of the most boring topics in the world: the four-color theorem.

“No matter what kind of map you want to make, any area in the world or some other imaginary world, you only need four colors to fill out each region with a different color so that no two adjacent regions are filled with the same color,” Lily prattled. Mary barely blinked. “Which, I guess isn’t all that interesting on its own as cartographers have been making maps forever, but what’s really neat about it is that they proved it with a computer! I mean, some mathematicians don’t want to accept it because it’s like, impossible to check by hand, but that’s what makes it so amazing. Just imagine if we could use computers to do all the grunt work in research!”

Lily quailed beneath the severity of Mary’s non-reaction, swallowing a thought about muggles outstripping wizards with this new technology. In Mary’s place, Emmeline would have had the decency to look at Lily like she was mad. Marlene would have inspected her nails with boredom. If Mary so much as blinked, Lily didn’t catch it. Lily was foundering.

“Of course, I’m sure this is boring. Not like you care much about computers. Not exactly magical,” Lily rambled. “So, um…hey, why don’t you tell me a little about yourself? Your parents are muggles, too. What do they do for a living?”

“My mum’s an artist and my father’s a professor.”

“Oh! A professor of what?” Lily asked, newly intrigued.

“Computer sciences.”

It wasn’t the most pleasant exchange of Lily’s life, and she found herself desperately hopeful that there would be no repeat occurrences of Mary’s aberrant…friendliness.

That night promised more uncomfortable interactions when Lily attended the weekly meeting of the Potions Society. The meeting was prototypical to the extreme. They all met in the Potions dungeons
as if for class, the agenda was scrawled on the board, and Slughorn had completely abandoned the
planned meeting points in favor of gossiping about his successes. The only times the conversation
drifted to potions was when Lily or one of the other more academically-inclined students led them
there, Slughorn kicking and screaming all the while. Figuratively speaking, of course.

Despite the tenuous connection between these society meetings and any educational value, Lily
enjoyed them. Lily might have remained ignorant of wizarding culture forever if Slughorn hadn’t
plucked her up for the Potions Society.

Only a month into her first year at Hogwarts, Slughorn had already picked her out of the lot of buck-
toothed young wizards and witches for special attention. She hadn’t been the best brewer in the year
– that honor was shared by James and Severus – but she had been spirited and willing to learn.

He’d first extended her an invitation after he overheard her ranting about Bartimeus Blackwell, a
Hufflepuff second-year. Lily had been outraged when Blackwell insisted he’d never so much as
heard of Edward Heath, asking if Heath was a greengrocer or muggle racecar driver. Lily, convinced
he was taking the mickey, had been incensed. She didn’t appreciate being made a fool of, even from
a second-year with hair like Shawn Cassidy.

Gently taking her aside, Slughorn had explained that it was actually likely that Blackwell, a
pureblood, had never heard of the muggle PM. He had encouraged her to come to the next Potions
Society meeting, which he then kindly dedicated to an in-depth explanation of the Ministry and how
it coordinated (or didn’t) with the muggle government. Until that day, Lily had still believed every
wizard was bound by the laws of parliament.

So Lily enjoyed the society meetings with Slughorn, the closest person to a mentor she had at
Hogwarts. The close proximity to Severus once a week? Less so.

She watched Severus throughout the meeting, still hung up on his unexplained absence at the
beginning of April and his even more inexplicable Grindylows invitation. Two unlikely
circumstances in such a short period of time struck Lily as suspicious, though; she had started to
attribute every strange happening in the school to the Grindylows since the beginning of the
investigation, and she was beginning to forget that the unexpected was guaranteed at wizarding
school.

It was odd to give Severus so much attention after having pointedly ignored his existence for a year
straight. Everything about him was so familiar. The lips quirked into a half-sneer was a sign of pride;
it meant that Sev knew the fact Slughorn had just shared and was pleased with his own knowledge.
The way he bent low to the desk so that his nose nearly skimmed the parchment was because his
vision was deteriorating, but he was too vain to consider glasses. (Lily always thought this had
something to do with James.) Even the way he parted his hair – straight down the middle because he
couldn’t be arsed to style it – was familiar.

She could tell a lot about him with one hard look, but the secret of his Grindylows membership was
hidden from her. Several times throughout the meeting, Sev sensed her eyes on him and whirled
around to face his voyeur. Lily was quick to turn away each time. Not even the prospect of unveiling
the secret of the Grindylows was worth giving Sev the false hope that she’d forgive him.

He might try to, and God it was horrible, talk to her again.

Against the odds, Lily managed to avoid discovery by Severus for the whole of the meeting. Her
attention to old friends didn’t go entirely unnoticed, however. To be a successful sycophant and
social climber required acute skills of human observation, and Slughorn noticed everything. From the
front of the from, Slughorn watched her with his pale green eyes, moustache positively twitching in
sympathy.

He asked Lily to remain behind after the meeting. It was past ten and time for her to return to the dormitories, but Lily graciously accepted a cup of tea instead. They retired to his office, Slughorn laughing cheerily about ‘making room in his little water closet.’ It was a tight fit, and Lily crossed her legs to take up as little space as possible. Slughorn needed the rest of it.

“You were quiet this evening, Miss Evans,” Slughorn said. “It’s unlike you. I hope you’re not moving towards a burn out. There’s only so many hours in the day and some of them need to be devoted to fun.”

Lily nodded her agreement, assured Slughorn that she was more social than ever now that she was dating Sirius.

Slughorn studied her. “You now, I was reading about the most fantastic discovery in the news recently. It seems a few muggles identified rings surrounding the planet Uranus. They were studying a star in the atmosphere and realized that the star kept disappearing from their view. The only explanation is that a few narrow rings – they think at least six, but possibly more – are circling the planet itself.”

“Rings?”

“Yes, rings. Completely changes the field of astronomy as they know it. Completely changes the field of astronomy as we know it. I think the centaurs already realized. Some of their more cryptic predictions hint towards it, but it’s impossible to know when those chaps are being concrete or abstract. I always thought it was rather metaphorical,” Slughorn explained.

“That’s a great discovery,” Lily said sincerely. She was a little low from ruminating over Severus, but she couldn’t help her excitement at anything new.

“Yes, it is. Completely extraordinary. And to think they managed it without magic. These muggles, never held a wand in their lives, invented the technology –” Slughorn, like many wizards, stumbled over the word, like it was something foreign, “and they invented so many uses for it. I truly believe some of the most brilliant, inquisitive minds belong to muggles. Truly, I do.”

It took Lily a moment to piece together Slughorn’s intentions, but she was able to make the connection before the silence stretched on too awkwardly. Having noticed her gaze lingering on Sev and knowing the source of their estrangement, Slughorn was trying to comfort her. He was far from the most politically sensitive wizard in the school, but he didn’t despise muggles, and he cared about Lily.

Lily smiled tightly, not because she was insincere but to mask a pit of vulnerability, the part of her that ached whenever an adult or authority figure acknowledged the weight of pureblood supremacy that rested heavily atop the shoulders of every muggleborn, day in and out. “Thank you, sir. I know what you’re trying to do, and I really appreciate it.”

“Well, I suppose we may dispense with the subtleties,” Slughorn said with a laugh.

“Severus missed the meeting a few weeks ago. I guess I was fixating on the why,” Lily explained. “I know you’re not supposed to care about what someone does once you’re finished with them. I’m supposed to scoff and say he can kiss his own arse – pardon me, professor, but you know what I mean. But I like to know his…progress. Is he getting any worse? Has he hurt anyone? You know, all of it.”
In times when she was less emotionally invested, she enjoyed the chance to watch purebloods react to examples of blood bigotry. Their varied responses were fascinating. With a clinical eye, Lily had noted almost all of them. There was sympathy, perhaps the most common, and ranging from Madam Pomfrey shoving a dozen lollipops into Lily’s hand, a tear at the corner of her eye to McGonagall’s pained grimace followed by bracing advice on how to best muddle through. Others feigned sudden deafness or made excuses, like Professor Chester. Lily’s favorite of all were people who vibrated with incandescent fury. Her friends like Mei-Lin and Dorcas had often become angry on her behalf, but whenever James heard an example of bigotry, he shook like he might tear off his own skin in rage, like he wanted to tear the entire wizarding world apart. It was gratifying to know she wasn’t the only one furious.

Slughorn was a fidgeter, a sub-category of the group that made excuses with a dash of sympathy for flavor. Lily almost couldn’t blame him. It would have been impossible to lead Slytherin House while also soundly condemning prejudice. His restlessness soon infected her, and Lily’s foot jangled back and forth, knocking into Slughorn’s chair on every other pass.

“Well, I don’t profess to know much,” Slughorn said, “But I do know that the only thing a person should be judged on is their merits, and you, Miss Evans, are an extraordinary witch.”

Lily smiled, bashful in spite of herself.

“Do you consider character when you recruit people for the Slug Club?” Lily asked.

“Are you asking why I extended an invitation to Mr. Snape?”

“No, no!” Offending Slughorn by criticizing his special soirees was not the way to engender honesty. It was time to lay her cards on the able. “Just…I think Severus might have missed the meeting at the turn of the month because he’s joined up with the Grindylows. I understand that he’s a prodigy when it comes to potions, but I don’t understand how they could overlook his proclivities. Shouldn’t a person’s character count for something?”

Slughorn’s color darkened when she mentioned the Grindylows, and he sat ramrod straight in his chair. “In confidence, Miss Evans, I’ve never much cared for the Grindylows.”

His tone was so flat that Lily believed, for the first time since she began her investigation, that an authority figure was being perfectly upfront about the society.

“Why not?”

“The Grindylows were already an institution when I was a student here. My sixth year, the group was particularly rancorous. We had a number of incidents: vandalized property, students publicly humiliated, peoples’ exams disrupted. The tone wasn’t frivolous. It was awful for every non-member, walking the halls and never knowing whether you were about to have your homework stolen or be panted in front of the girl you fancied.”

They sounded like the Marauders, back when their mischief had erred to the side of torment.

“I’ll admit that I recruit to my little club based on the same criteria. I’m looking for the brightest and most interesting students. And, no, character does not often come into play. But the difference is that I never shield my students from the consequences of their bad behavior. Mr. Snape may attend my parties, but if he hurts someone on the basis of their blood, I’ll see him before Dumbledore to explain himself. It’s not like that with the Grindylows. Any hurt caused under the auspices of the society are completely written off by the powers at this school. It’s been that way for hundreds of years.”
Lily wasn’t much of a philosopher. She’d read a few of the classics: Plato and Locke and Cordelia the Crying Countess. The words always zoomed past her; she’d seek the final, concrete answer after hundreds of pages of speculation, only to find that the final conclusion was that human beings knew nothing and likely never would. It was beyond frustrating. Lily’s approach to discovery often included a healthy dose of appeal to authority. She was, after all, a teenage witch and couldn’t be expected to make every great discovery herself. To the most meaningful questions in the universe, however, the best the experts could do was shrug their shoulders and concede defeat.

If there was one belief that Lily shared with most of the major philosophers of western history, however, it was that truth out to be pursued regardless. And if there was one thing she’d taken from the Newtonians, it was that every action bore a consequence. So, it was no small exaggeration to say that the fatalistic tone in Slughorn’s voice as he spoke about the Grindylows in terms that challenged the very tenets of Lily’s belief system – that they’d continue to operate in secrecy without oversight forever – drove Lily seven kinds of mad. Mad enough that she didn’t filter her words as she ranted.

“It’s just not right! The things they get away with, and I can’t even begin to fathom how. Did you know that a bunch of students went missing on the first, just didn’t go to their classes. I spoke with Professor Bukhari, and he has a clear memory of them all attending, even though I have witnesses who swear the opposite. It’s obviously the Grindylows at work, but if they’re to the point of…I don’t even know, cursing the professors, then, I don’t know how the school doesn’t step in and put a stop to it!”

Slughorn glowed at her rant. He tapped a finger to his nose, conspiratorially, and glanced around to make sure they were truly alone. It was so much like something out of a noir film that Lily grew giddy. She knew the signs. He was about to give her the scoop.

“If you were to look at my attendance records, I’m sure you’d find much the same as Professor Bukhari…however, my memory’s sharp, and I seem to remember that there were two absences that day from my sixth-year class.”

“They didn’t get to you,” Lily breathed.

Slughorn was quick to correct her. “Perhaps, or perhaps they never needed to get to Professor Bukhari to convince him to say what he did. The foundations, they run deep, Miss Evans.”

“I really appreciate you sharing this with me,” Lily said.

There was so much to do with this new intelligence. She needed to figure out which sixth-years had Potions on the first and see if there were any obvious candidates there. With her lead on the Marauders and now this, she was slowly but surely narrowing in on her target. Soon enough, Sirius would slip up as well, and then, she’d have everything she needed to break this thing open. First would come truth. Then, consequences.

“Of course, Miss Evans. Like I said, I don’t much care for the Grindylows,” Slughorn said, and then, slyly, “Besides, they didn’t see fit to recruit me.”

Lily had never so appreciated man’s ability to hold a grudge.

Late evening on a Friday night typically saw all the Gryffindor girls gathered together, only so that their paths could diverge come nightfall. For Mary, Marlene and Emmeline, Friday evening signaled the time to prepare for a night out, and they spent them fighting for counter space in the loo. For Lily and Mei-Lin, Fridays were a chance to pal around with Will in one of the abandoned classrooms on
the third floor or to let loose in their empty dormitory. They savored these moments of freedom, where they were guaranteed a shield from judgmental eyes. Friday nights had seen Lily and Mei-Lin dress up in all their clothes and strut across an imaginary catwalk, dance parties, frank conversations about sex, and many belted renditions of Dancing Queen.

As per usual, Marlene and Emmeline were in the lav. The smell of burnt hair wafted through the dormitory as Emmeline liberally employed a straightening charm to her shiny auburn hair. Mei-Lin lay on her stomach across her bed, a sketch pad in front of her, fast filling up with doodles of the Gringotts goblins. Occasionally, she’d lift the pad up so that Lily could admire her more realistic drawings.

Lily sat cross-legged on the floor, never so desirous for a desk. She’d stacked her books one atop the other to create a makeshift surface on which she could write. Painstakingly, she’d written the name of every sixth-year and was assigning points based on their popularity and accomplishments. From there, she’d ascribed each student a probability of membership to the Grindylows. It was far from scientific, but it didn’t need to be. There were only about forty students in their whole class and nine members of the Grindylows, which meant that nearly a quarter of the names must be members.

The girls’ dormitory at night was lit by two lanterns that automatically flared to life after the natural sunshine through the windows faded. One had lit about fifteen minutes earlier, so Lily had to squint slightly to make out her own hasty handwriting. A shadow fell across her parchment, darkening it further, and Lily somewhat deliriously wondered if the magic in the lanterns had run out.

“What are you working on?”

At Mary’s voice, Lily swept the parchment to the side, hastily shielding it and in the process knocking over a bottle of blue ink. Deflecting, Lily said, “Why aren’t you getting ready with the others?”

“Are you suggesting I don’t look good enough to go out, Lily?” Mary said blandly.

It was the second time Lily had stepped in it that week with Mary, and she was strongly considering a muzzle to prevent any future faux pas. Of course, Mary didn’t require the same mirror time as everyone else. Mary rolled out of bed in the morning looking divine: bright olive skin and still half-closed eyes that were somehow seductive rather than exhausted. Even her tangled hair could be thrown up in a bun and would look healthy rather than slobbish, like Lily’s equally hasty morning hair routine.

“Sorry, my brain’s just unfocused,” Lily said sheepishly. “I’m working on an essay for Divination.”

In six years, Mary had never stepped foot in a Divination classroom. Marlene took Divination, however, so perhaps that was why Mary reached for the parchment all the same. Desperate, Lily slammed her palm down on the edge, earning a raised eyebrow from Mary. The other girl tugged. Lily pulled. That quickly and they were in a standoff over a piece of parchment, all while Mei-Lin hummed, oblivious and useless, a few meters away.

“What the fuc*, Lily?”

Lily was not afraid of being labelled ‘crazy.’ Far from it. In her opinion, most of the best women were. Still, she drew the line at gnawing Mary’s wrist to force her to release the parchment, and after a few more moments of tugging, Mary pulled away with the prize. Lily dived forward to reclaim it, but Mary flipped it over, seeing everything.

“What the fuc*, Lily?”
Trying to spin a story to match the Divination essay lie might have worked – Lily could say she was trying to predict which of her classmates would meet an untimely demise – but Marlene could debunk it in a second. Lily’s habit of carefully labelling her work made it fairly obvious what she was trying to do: narrow in on the most popular, accomplished students in the school. Internally, Lily berated herself for not thinking to transcribe her work in code. The decoder ring she’d pulled from a crackerjack box at age six would never be more apropos, and she’d wasted the opportunity.

Despite her unforgivable lack of foresight in preparing for an eventuality where someone saw her list, the necessary lie came smoothly, “I’m trying to figure out who’s going to be Head Boy and Girl next year.”

“And you think the best candidate is Potter?” Mary said. Beside James’ name, Lily had marked a probability of 99%.

“Well, you know, he’s gotten a lot better, and his marks are amazing. Maybe Dumbledore will give him the post so that he keeps the other troublemakers in line,” Lily said.

Mary looked at her like she was an idiot. “And you think Sirius is the third most likely candidate for the job. A 90%, Lily? Really? Has he snogged you senseless or is love just that blind?”

“Um…you know that Dumbledore…he’s a kook,” Lily supplied weakly. “Okay, you’re right. I’m still trying to work out some kinks in the methodology.”

“Have you considered giving extra points to the prefects? History says Dumbledore normally pulls from those,” Mary said, and there must have been something gratifying about seeing someone else’s stupidity because Lily swore there was a chuckle in Mary’s voice.

“Good call. Prefects. Alright, then, the prefect with the highest score on my list is Danyal Shafīq. I’m placing my bets now. Thank you for your help,” Lily babbled, because that was all she seemed to know how to do when faced with Mary’s stoicism.

“I wouldn’t put my money on Danyal,” Mary warned. “It’s totally going to be Emmeline.”

Privately, Lily had her doubts, though she wisely kept her own confidence for once. Emmeline was the Gryffindor prefect, and she did alright in class, but she wasn’t showy. There was nothing that particularly stood out about Emmeline when she stood beside her gorgeous and bubbly friends (read: Mary and Marlene in that order). Besides, Emmeline was only a castoff prefect, given the opportunity after Lily burnt out. List aside, Lily was going to march to Dumbledore’s office in a fit of indignation if Rita Slughorn didn’t nab Head Girl. She was the Hufflepuff prefect, a member of the Chess Club, a member of the Charms club, a member of the Potions Society, and, of course, a member of her uncle’s Slug Club. In comparison, Emmeline sporadically attended meetings of the Dueling Club.

“Thanks for the advice,” Lily repeated.

Mary didn’t move to leave, instead crouching down so that she was closer to Lily’s level. Mary fraternizing with Lily was unheard of, and the surprise move made Mei-Lin gape over her sketchbook. Since Wednesday, Mary had been weirdly present in the dormitory – present in the mental, not physical sense, since usually she laid about not engaging with anything Lily said and only humming along to her friends’ chatter. Tonight, she’d sought Lily out for a conversation, and she seemed interested in continuing it.

“Any special plans tonight?” Mary asked.
And just like that, Lily saw Mary’s motives for what they were. She was jealous. Her snark about being snogged senseless hadn’t been a well-aimed joke but a telling barb about her own feelings.

Lily edged away, nervous that Mary might suddenly devolve into some jealousy-struck beast and tear off her head. Plainly speaking, Lily had stolen Mary’s pseudo-boyfriend, and this was the kind of offense that caused girls to turn on one another all the time. She heard it in stories whenever she visited the loo, girls complaining about their ungracious, so-called-best-friends, who flirted with their crushes and accepted invitations to Hogsmeade that ought to have been turned down on the spot. Unlike those girls, Lily wasn’t even close with Mary, so she didn’t have the shield of fond memories to protect her from her dormmate’s wrath.

Mary never lunged. The tension slowly eased as Lily realized Mary only wanted a civil conversation. Mary may have been jealous, but she wasn’t evil. Maybe Lily had only hoped for a vicious reaction because in the wake of her realization, Lily’s second reaction was guilt. Unwittingly, she’d interrupted a relationship that was real, all so she could construct something fake in its place. Yes, Mary and Sirius had been toxic for each other by all accounts, but at least Mary genuinely cared whether he was dating other girls. Lily couldn’t say the same beyond how it would impact her ability to wring secrets from him.

Lily sprang to her feet, “Actually, I’m going to go find Sirius. Mei-Lin, I’ll be back later.”

Both girls waved at Lily as she fast-walked out the door. Passing Marlene and Emmeline, Lily vaguely processed their startled voices.

“What on earth’s gotten into her?” Marlene asked.

“Probably the usual Lily nonsense,” Emmeline replied.

Lily might have been offended, except she was known for barreling through the halls at top speed. The time it took to dart between classes or from the loo to the Great Hall were wasted seconds that could have been better spent. There was nothing she loathed more than her sluggish classmates, who clogged the corridors with their slow-paced conversations and even slower steps. The intersection between DADA and Charms was overwhelmed every Tuesday as double classes let out, and Lily was always tempted to whip out her wand, not to hex anyone, but simply to nudge them along with the sharper point as they stopped dead-center in the hall to lace their trainers or shout insults at their mates several meters ahead. If she wasn’t sure it would end with her laid up in the hospital after a heart attack, Lily might have considered a career as a traffic cop.

Besides, she couldn’t worry about Emmeline’s flip-flopping opinion about her when she was too busy lamenting Mary’s jealousy. Lily recalled how only a few weeks ago, Sirius had been desperate to make Mary jealous. He’d sounded so eager to hear her reaction to him snogging Charlene Rivera. If Mary was jealous now, Sirius deserved to know.

He deserved to know because maybe he’d chuck Lily on the spot and rush off to be with the girl he truly loved. It would be a blow to Lily’s story, but she couldn’t come between two people who genuinely cared for one another in good conscience. Technically, she couldn’t do anything lately in good conscience, but there were limits even in the name of investigative journalism, and Lily had just rubbed up against one.

Lily made a vow to herself. She would tell Sirius about Mary’s jealousy, arming him with the information to make his own decision. If he wanted to stay with Lily after that, she would forget about Mary’s strange behavior, chock it up to too-little-too-late from Mary, a girl who had given Sirius nothing but the cold shoulder for a month now.
Finding Sirius was an event, one Lily should have anticipated given his penchant for gallivanting with his mates. For some reason, she’d envisioned finding him in front of the fire, cozied up with a book. It was laughable really. Instead, she checked what felt like every room in the castle in her pursuit of him: the dormitories, the kitchens, the empty Ancient Runes classrooms, and the Astronomy Tower.

If she’d been a typical girlfriend, she would have known where to find her boyfriend on a Friday night. Normal girls would have asked. The idea of keeping up with his movements hadn’t even occurred to her, and now she was suffering for it.

Exhausting the castle, Lily marched out the sturdy oak doors of the Great Hall, intent on canvassing the grounds. It was the part of spring, towards the beginning of the season, where the weather couldn’t make up its mind. That afternoon, the sun had swelled to a crescendo of yellow heat and students had flocked to the courtyards to sunbathe. Nearly dark now, the air had cooled enough that Lily pulled her robes tight, suppressing shivers as she scanned the grounds.

She happened upon her target near the Clock Tower. Lily was surprised to see him, though she rationalized that Sirius had to, of course, turn up somewhere. He was dressed in all black so that she nearly missed him in the murky half-dark of evening. And, he was alone.

“Sirius!” Lily called. He didn’t turn around at the call, so she tried again, “Sirius Black!”

This time, he turned around.

Having a name, which was a synonym to an obscenely common word had trained Sirius to completely tune out all calls of his first name. Too often in his early years, he’d jerked around suddenly only to find that a student was exclaiming about something entirely separate. The same held true for his surname alone. To gain his attention, students and professors both had to shout out his full name for it to saw through the fluff between his ears and process in his brain. The only person who could call Sirius’s first name alone was James. She’d seen Sirius turn around immediately at that, like he was always listening for James.

“I was hoping to run into you,” Lily called in greeting. Sirius continued walking, but slowed so that she could catch up with him. Even with his adjusted pace, Lily had to walk in double time to compensate for his height.

“Enjoying the warm weather?” Sirius asked sarcastically.

“Positively freezing,” Lily answered.

Unlike Lily, who had worn a robe to shield against the elements, Sirius was dressed in one of his leather jackets and a pair of bike gloves. Everything was more glaringly muggle against the magical background of Hogwarts, more of a statement. Lily didn’t have an eye for fashion, so she’d only discovered through dating him that Sirius owned not one but several leather jackets. They all looked alike – black, cut short before reaching his hip, and rough-shodden, like they’d been used thoroughly. One durable jacket should have been enough, but Lily was fast learning that Sirius’s eye for sartorial detail far outstripped her own.

“Since it’s Friday night and all, I thought you and I could maybe spend it together. To talk,” Lily said. “We could go for a walk since we’re already outside or maybe play some gobstones…”

Wholesome fun probably wasn’t the best way to lure Sirius Black. Lily struggled for a suggestion more tailored to Sirius’s interests, but social creativity had never been her strong suit. She wasn’t a complete freak – derogatory statements from Petunia aside – so it wasn’t like she spent her Friday
nights holed up in the common room reading her biographies or studying the encyclopedia. On Friday nights, she liked to have fun like the rest of the school. Only, Lily’s idea of fun was talking with Will and Mei-Lin for hours on end. They didn’t really do much of anything at all.

“I know! We could light a fire and dance naked beneath the pale moonlight, really give credence to those witch stereotypes.”

It dawned on Lily that Sirius might not recognize the muggle phrase and take this as an invitation. She held her breath. If worst came to worst and Sirius expected her to strip naked, she could just asphyxiate. Problem solved.

“We’ve already danced together beneath the moonlight, but I like the new nudity addition. Yes, just the kind of enterprising thinking your generation needs.”

Sirius laughed, and Lily breathed again.

“Really though, Lily, I have plans already,” Sirius said.

“What plans?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Sirius said, which Lily interpreted to mean ‘plans that don’t include you.’

“I’m your girlfriend,” Lily said plainly.

“Water’s wet.”

Lily rolled her eyes. “My point is, well, isn’t this the kind of question that girlfriends get to ask? I mean, I haven’t had a lot of experience dating, but I think it is.”

“Huh…I don’t know. Mary never asked, but that doesn’t mean much,” Sirius said, as stumped as she was.

“Speaking of Mary. I just spoke to her, and I really wanted to–”

“The last thing I want right now is to talk about Mary,” Sirius said, smoothly cutting her off before she could launch into her revelations about Mary and her newfound lurkiness. “Listen, luv, I have to go. We can spend time together tomorrow night.”

Before she could manage a word edgewise, Sirius leaned in to kiss her goodbye. His tongue ran against the unyielding ridge of her lips; Lily remained closed against him. When he pulled away, eyes hooded and kinder than before the kiss, Lily decided to try to engage him one last time.

“I’d really been hoping we could talk about something,” Lily said.

“All the more reason for me to go.”

He ruffled her hair, and it wasn’t just a casual passing either, but an organized attack on any semblance of neatness, leaving a bird’s nest in place of curls. If there was one thing Lily despised, it was when people touched her hair uninvited. Being ginger brought with it a host of unpleasant interactions with strangers at the pharmacy and other mundane locales. People had a habit of running their dirty hands through her hair as a way of announcing themselves, always followed by a compliment Lily was unable to appreciate because she was too busy recovering from the heart attack that accompanied a strange, old lady petting her in public.

Lily’s father also had a penchant for tousling his daughter’s hair. It was a move he saved for those
moments when he needed to placate his daughter. Whenever he’d head off to work without preparing breakfast, a quick hair rumple. When he couldn’t scrape together enough quid for a new school uniform, that same pat and shake of the head. On the nights he came home well after dark with the tang of beer on his breath, Lily’s hair would be sent flying in every direction. It was a gesture of both apology and warning.

There was no use in trying to evade the hair muss either. Douglas Evans didn’t much care for his daughters erecting boundaries, after all they were his kids. The last time Lily had tried to shy away was when she was fourteen. She’d known it was coming because her father had just announced he’d been called into work on Christmas Day and that the girls would have to spend the holiday alone. Meanwhile, Lily had known perfectly well that the factory would be closed tight on the twenty-fifth. Driven either by guilt or habit, her father had reached for her hair, and Lily had raised a shoulder to block him, arching away. Her father had sighed, asked why she was trying to punish him, and left before she could answer. When he returned home the next day, the first thing he did was give her hair a hearty ruffle.

Removing his palm from the crown of her head, Sirius said, “Now run off to bed like a good girl.”

“Well, that was paternalistic,” Lily said crossly.

As much as Lily disliked Sirius acting like her father, Sirius doubly didn’t like being compared to one. His face gave a spasm so blatant that Lily didn’t struggle to track it. Then, he closed up like a finished book.

“Good night, Lily,” he said.

He walked away, continuing his trek towards the Quidditch Pitch.

Calling after his retreating back, Lily shouted, “You’re really not going to tell me where you’re going?”

With nothing separating them but empty lawn, it was impossible to pretend he wasn’t ignoring her. Mary was the last thing on her mind, her suspicions about the Grindylows dinged. Lily wondered how the Marauders had gotten away with any of their shenanigans over the years because they were perfectly obvious when up to something. Sirius hadn’t even lied to evade the question.

She could try to follow him, but ten to one he would notice her stalking him across the grounds. There wasn’t a tree or hiding place along his path. Lily didn’t understand what Sirius wanted out of their relationship as their time together hadn’t been edifying, but she was certain he’d object to a clingy girlfriend. If he was going to chuck her, she wanted it to be for a good reason.

Figuring she ought to return to Mei-Lin, Lily retraced her steps. She didn’t think she’d ever grown tired of walking the Hogwarts grounds after dark. There weren’t any students in sight, yet the grounds teemed with life. Owls were as plentiful as stars in the night sky, swooping overhead at low-speeds, lazy after a daytime of slumber. Their emergence sent the small-mammal life of Scotland scattering, anything to evade sharp talons and even sharper eyes. Owls made for silent predators, and the only noise was the crunch of Lily’s trainers disturbing the dirt, her own breathing, and the whisper of the lake.

Walking the grounds of Hogwarts offered Lily a freedom she couldn’t find elsewhere. Lily had never felt comfortable roaming the streets at night. Rationally, she recognized that magic was her protection and that she could defend herself against any attacker, but there remained the shadow of panic dogging her steps after the sun went down, urging her pace faster until she reached the safety of home. At Hogwarts, she was free from fears of men lurking in the dark. The night transformed
from something sinister to something soothing, and she walked the grounds wearing the starry sky like a blanket.

Lily’s isolation was interrupted. A figure walked steadily towards her. Even from a distance, she could pick out the person’s identify, solely by his gate, the way his arms swung busily with each step and his shoulders jerked to imaginary music.

“Fancy seeing you here, Potter. What are you up to?” Lily said. She tucked her tongue against the roof of her mouth to prevent herself from stating the obvious: that he was likely embroiled in the same mystery plan as Sirius.

“I’m just headed to meet…Actually, I could ask you the same thing,” James said, as lacking in discretion as his mate.

“Oh, I’m just searching for my beloved boyfriend. Seen him?”

“Did you check the dormitory?” James asked.

Lily frowned. “Now, that’s just an insult to my intelligence.”

“Unintentional, I promise,” James chuckled.

“If you’re not out here to meet Sirius, why are you here? Hot date with Danyal?” With a little mental maths, Lily determined her question was born out of 10% sincere curiosity, 30% cover for her investigation, and 60% sheer pettiness. She wanted to see sweat drip from his brow.

“What? Where’d you hear–?” James stumbled just as she’d hoped through his response.

There was genuine satisfaction to be found in the few times she managed to gain the upper hand with him, and Lily relished it. “She told me she was your date to that—”

“—party.”

“Oh. Then, yeah, I’m supposed to be meeting her by the boathouse,” James said.

He parted with this information unwillingly. James had been careful not to mention the name of his date when he rejected her, and he was obviously displeased that Danyal had blabbed. He shouldn’t have cared. Since finding out, Lily had only been left with a crippling sense of inferiority compared to the statuesque Slytherin. Nothing for him to worry about.

“Best you don’t keep her waiting then,” Lily said, nodding in the direction of the boathouse.

She made to walk away, abandoning him just like Sirius had her, but didn’t make it very far before James came jogging up behind her. “Wait, Lily! It’s dark and late. Let me walk you back to the Tower.”

“Um…It’s Hogwarts. What could possibly happen to me between here and the Fat Lady? Do you think I’m going to collapse into a feminine swoon and not make it?” Lily teased.

“I just don’t think it’s smart for you to wander the corridors alone at night,” James said.

“I’m noticing a lot of paternalism from the boys at this school tonight. What’s up with that?” Lily muttered. James had fallen into step beside her, not needing an invitation to see her back safely even as she groused. She glared at his uniform shoes, shiny under the moonlight because there was nothing second-hand for James Potter.

“I’m not patronizing you. Off-hand, I can name at least eight people who wouldn’t mind seeing you
bleed. Does that sound safe to you?” James corrected sourly.

“Last time I counted, there were only seven,” Lily huffed and then paused. “Point made. Mr. Potter, would you be so kind as to accompany me to my dormitory?”

“Is that an invitation to follow you up?”

Lily ignored his grin, the mouth-watering smile that set her nerves asky, and gave him a dirty look as she said, “No.”

It was probably smart that she yielded then because she could smell a lecture in the air. James was exactly the princely type who would rant and rave about “vulnerable” people taking undue risks with their safety. He got away with it too because his concern was not patronizing, like he said, and wasn’t decided by gender or blood status. That he was right and she’d been too cavalier because of her fondness for Hogwarts and all it had taught her didn’t do much for her spirits.

“I’ll escort you as far as the portrait of our dear Fat Lady,” James said gallantly.

He offered his arm, and Lily hooked hers through, so that their elbows nestled together. They compromised on the pace, James taking somewhat shorter steps than he’d have liked with his monster-bird limbs and Lily hurrying to accommodate him. The thrill of their banter picked her mood right up from the ground; they walked that fine line between clever conversation and flirting, and she trembled with the urge to stick her toe over that line, just to see what would happen.

She sighed, “You know, it chafes, accepting help from my greatest adversary.”

“I’m your greatest adversary?” James demanded. “I thought we just established that you have very real enemies at this school.”

“Nah, they just hate every muggleborn. For a real nemesis, you need personal rancor. You and I have that in spades,” Lily said, waving a hand imperiously.

James snorted, and the sound held enough judgment to fill an encyclopedia. “Firstly, I’m not your enemy. Bloody hell, Lily, let it go. And second, I wouldn’t be so sure it’s not personal.”

Lily decided to glide right past his first point. She’d yet to receive an actual apology for the most humiliating incident of her life, and in the absence of one, she wasn’t feeling particularly forgiving. To the second, she simply asked, “Why would those bigots hate me more than any other muggleborn?”

James had the decency to look away. “Well, there’s no easy way to say this. I think there’s something about your, er, demeanor that irks them. They find you, well…annoying.”

“Those fiends! And here I thought they couldn’t be any more dastardly!” Lily exploded.

“That’s death eaters for ya,” James commiserated.

“You know, they just can’t handle seeing a muggleborn with such a secure sense of self, so they have to try to tear me down,” Lily said, jabbing her finger accusingly in the air.

She imagined the smug, lackluster face of Desmond Avery. He was always preaching about blood superiority, but his face was doughty with baby fat, and he looked like a four-year-old when he smiled. Clearly, they were operating on different definitions of superiority.

“Well, yeah,” James said.
“How exactly do I, specifically, annoy them?” Lily asked.

With his free hand, James rummaged through his hair. He’d been uncertain to admit that she was disliked before, but under the fire of her glare, he relented.

“How, I happen to find all of these traits delightful, nay admirable, but they do rub some people the wrong way…”

“Don’t hold back,” Lily ordered.

“You’re loud.”

“Loud?”

“Let me put it this way, right before class starts, I can hear you and whatever you’re telling Mei-Lin clear as day from out in the hall. You’re the first voice I can pick out when I enter any room, actually, because you’re, again, loud,” James said.

“What else?” Lily asked.

James dropped her arm from his. He turned around, so that he faced her, and walked slowly backwards, never checking behind him for obstacles but relying on Lily for guidance. Gone was his former reluctance, and he smiled hugely at her as he prepared to verbally decimate her.

“You’re always in a rush,” James said. “I’ve seen you throw elbows in the corridors.”

“Very true,” Lily conceded without a hint of shame. “I’ve got places to be.”

“Yes, you’re very busy. They don’t like that either, by the way, that you’re so involved in everything. Imagine if someone hated you, just for a second. I know it’s hard to picture. Now, imagine that this person couldn’t join a single school activity or have a moment’s peace because you’re bloody everywhere. I swear, I think you have clones some days,” James said.

“It is preposterous to picture,” Lily joked.

James’s smile impossibly widened as he peered down at her. “I agree, perfectly preposterous. Then, finally, there’s the big one…”

“What is?”

“You’re a know-it-all.”

Until then, Lily had taken her faults in stride because there was no arguing with the truth. She was busy and she ran through the castle like the zombie apocalypse had broken out on heels, and she could believe she was loud, even if she’d never fully considered it. But, but, she was not a know-it-all.

“I must have the lowest Transfiguration marks of any know-it-all in the history of the entire world,” Lily said. “Honestly, I’m an idiot. Mentally deficient even. I don’t know where they came up with that. A know-it-all?”

“Come off it, Lily. You’re brilliant, and everyone knows it. And you can come off as a know-it-all sometimes. You tend to drop all sorts of inane…er, unexpected facts into conversations with people.”

“But that’s not because I think I know so much more than everyone else! It’s just interesting, and who doesn’t like to learn? If I read something fascinating, why would I keep it to myself?” Lily
On rare occasion, Lily wondered whether a magical hat could use drugs and if so, whether the Sorting Hat might have been high the day of her sorting because she seemed pegged for Ravenclaw house. No one there would be confused by a person spouting off facts, wouldn’t mistake the act as being for material gain, while the other houses looked for ulterior motives. The foundation of her friendship outside the paper with Dorcas was based in the girl’s appreciation for learning. When Lily shared a random fact with Dorcas, Dorcas would listen thoughtfully, eyes averted as if sight might distract her ears from their task, nodding along when things made sense and rubbing her chin when her understanding caught on a snag. Dorcas nearly never asked follow-up questions, but Lily could watch as she internalized the information, spotting the moment it settled into her memory for safekeeping.

“Besides, claiming to be a know-it-all is just stupid. Because really, how much does any one person know? What I don’t know is always going to far outstrip what I do. For example, think of all the rooms in the world! I’ll never know the layout of even one percent of those, and that’s one eensy-weensy thing! I know nothing,” Lily added definitively.

“Lily, who’s the philosopher that made the idea of knowing nothing famous?” James asked knowingly.

“Socrates.”

James’ lips stretched and moved as he exaggeratedly mouthed ‘know-it-all’ at her. Irritated, Lily took a swipe at him, but he dodged easily out of the way, snickering at how she’d walked into his trap. As he hooted and fell into step beside her, his eyes never left her face for a second.

“Lily, I never said I had a problem with you being a loud, frenetic, know-it-all. In fact, I find those to be some of your best qualities. Half-librarian, half-Tasmanian-devil? What more could a bloke ask for in a girl?”

“And what are you?” Lily challenged. “Half-blind and half-spider?”

“Spider?”

“You have freakishly long legs,” Lily explained.

“Ah, yes. Again, what more could a girl ask for?”

Without breaking stride, James said, voice more solemn before, “But, seriously, Lily, don’t change for a bunch of berks like them. You’re perfect just as you are.”

They arrived at the doors to the Entrance Hall, and James hauled the giant door open for her to pass. His arm was within reach, and it would have been easy to slip hers back beneath it, to gain back that press of warmth from when they’d walked arm in arm. Unsure, Lily hesitated awkwardly, while he closed the door. Like her arms might betray her and scream their desire to him, Lily folded them against her chest. James made no move to grab her arm, so they resumed walking with a respectful distance between them.

Lily chose not to comment on whether a girl could indeed ask for better than James Potter because her humiliating instinct was no, she could not. Instead, she returned to the subject of her apparent enemies. “You’re right about the eight people who apparently find me annoying and have never heard of Plato. Personal rancor has been introduced. You’re hereby demoted to my number two nemesis, but if you work really hard, I’m sure you can earn back your title.”
“You’re very quippy tonight,” James commented.

Frankly, Lily said, “It’s because I’m with you. You’re always so clever with the things you say. It’s like tennis. You’re always serving these witty remarks. It makes me want to return the ball.”

James stopped walking and just looked at her. Uncomfortable, Lily turned away, kept walking and forced James to catch up with unbroken strides. In the past, she would have interpreted that pause as carrying emotional weight, like her compliment had struck through to his very heart. Recent history had proven, however, that her understanding of James was shoddy, nonexistent even. For all she knew, James had paused to contemplate how any girl could be so pathetic as to still admire him after being so soundly rejected. She certainly felt pathetic.

“You see our relationship as very combative, don’t you?” James said, returning to her tennis comparison.

*Because you made it that way.*

The time for honesty had passed, so Lily changed the subject, “Danyal’s very pretty.”

“Seriously?”

“What? I’m just saying, she’s a good choice if you like pretty girls, which I imagine you do because why wouldn’t you? She’s intelligent, too. A prefect. How many OWLs did she manage?”

“Dunno, I think seven,” James said, not giving the question much thought.

Seven to Lily’s six.

“Whew! Seven! Now, there’s the dream girl. Smart and lovely,” Lily continued, voice lighter than air to contrast with the very real heaviness developing in her stomach.

“Why are you doing this?” James snapped.

“What? I can’t help noticing what a catch Danyal is. I’m a real savant of dateable girls. You know, I’ve noticed Danyal is nice, too?” Lily continued.

“Stop. Please, stop. I’ll pay you to leave off this,” James pleaded.

“I would have thought you’d be happy to brag about her. I mean, that’s kind of what blokes do when they luck out with a girl like Danyal, right? She’s just perfect. You must be so happy.”

James halted in his tracks, once again, and this time, he forced Lily to do the same. They were halfway up the fourth-floor staircase, James in front, and she couldn’t continue on without body-checking him to the side. He whirled around to face her. They were fast passing the territory of light banter. James was livid.

“You know, Sirius is such a swell guy. Every girl in school says he’s just so fit, and he has that whole brooding, I could snap at any moment bad boy thing to his credit. You must be so happy,” James said, mimicking her peppy delivery to the letter. The only difference was the way the veins of his crossed arms visibly bulged.

“I am,” Lily said, just as pissy.

“He’s so dreamy,” James continued, like she had never answered his question, “I bet you can’t wait for him to sweep you off your feet and give you your first proper stuffing. So happy.”
Lily might have slapped him if he didn’t choose that moment to wheel back around and continue up the stairs. Instead, she raced after him, figuring she might be able to grab a chuck of his stupidly messy hair and send him tumbling down the stairs.

“How dare you! That’s just vulgar and rude and inappropriate, and I’m going to run out of adjectives for how much that wasn’t okay!”

Buffeted by her indignation, Lily matched James’ pace, drawing close by his side. His jaw was locked tight, and he’d grown as red as a beet. Anger did no favor for James in the personality or looks department.

“You’re right, completely inappropriate. Just like you trying to punish me for not taking you to a bloody party is inappropriate,” James said through clenched teeth.

Lily opened her mouth to retort but couldn’t construct an argument that held up. He’d aimed to sexually humiliate her with his barb, but so had she when she blathered on about Danyal. Given a few more seconds of silence to rant, and Lily might have said much the same about James hoping to get in Danyal’s knickers. Sometimes nothing seemed beyond her. Certainly, nothing got beyond James, who gave as good as he got, always; he didn’t pull punches just because she was a girl or a Gryffindor or had a stupid crush on him that announced itself in goofy smiles, big as a billboard. When throwing the first hex, you couldn’t turn around and be outraged when your opponent returned with one of their own.

Shrinking in on herself, Lily sank into the wall at the top of the stairwell. He was right. She was out of control, trying to provoke a reaction from him, not to punish him like he suggested, but because the only times she could tell what he was thinking was when he was red-blooded with fury. And alright, maybe just a little because she felt small and worthless at the thought of James and Danyal together, and it smarted her pride. Challenging their relationship, belittling it, reversed the tables, giving her a few moments to feel as if she were the strong one.

The pit that had opened up in her chest and was swirling with anxiety seconded James’ call that it was time to stop. She ought to be better than this. She’d never been a moral authority on much of anything, but she also wasn’t cruel for the sake of it. Remembering that James had feelings and wasn’t just as a cut-out representation of her rejection had become a struggle, but it was one that a good person would take on.

“I’m sorry. I’ll lay off,” Lily offered quietly.

James didn’t say anything for a long minute. Inside, Lily shriveled and languished in the agony of waiting, and when he did finally respond it was only with a stilted “whatever.” Then, he resumed walking, assuming Lily would trot along after. She didn’t, and James was halfway up the next flight of stairs before he realized that Lily hadn’t followed. When he did, he whirled around, hands in the air, to glare at her.

“Come on,” he snapped.

“It’s a two-minute walk from here,” Lily said quietly, but her voice carried, bouncing off the stone walls to James’ waiting ears. “I can make it on my own. Thank you for your company.”

James muttered something to himself, and the sound didn’t drift downwards as clearly, but Lily thought she made out the word ‘insufferable.’ Then, he took the steps two at a time to reach her side again.

“Don’t be stubborn,” James said. “Come on.”
Eyes fixed on the chipped stone of the landing, avoiding the hazel eyes that dominated her daydreams, Lily realized it was once again time for honesty.

Miserably, Lily said, “I was being a prat before because I’m jealous of you and Danyal, which doesn’t make it right. I’m sorry. I really do think all those good things about her, and I hope you are truly happy dating her or whatever it is you’re doing.”

Long, weighty silences were becoming a habit between them. Lily knew James was looking at her, and she knew his expression would be as intense as it was inscrutable, so she simply didn’t look.

“Lily…”

When she still didn’t look up, James brought three knuckles to her chin, gently pressing upwards until she met his eyes. Whether he approved or not, her wounded confession had sapped the anger from him, and he no longer looked like he wanted to strangle himself to end the conversation.

“You shouldn’t be feeling jealous of me while you’re with Sirius,” James said, like Lily needed something so obvious explained.

“I know.”

“It’s not right,” James repeated.

“I know. I just need to get over you, I mean, it,” Lily said.

“How about a trade? I’ll forgive you if you forgive me?” James said, “It’s only fair.”

Lily actually smiled. “Nice try.”

They shared a laugh. None of the tension dissolved. It still hung thick in the air, but clear as a yellow brick road, Lily could see the path out for the both of them. Step by step, they could crawl their way out of the morass of complications that had enveloped them and make their way to friendship.

“Come on, I’ll walk you the rest of the way,” James offered again.

Lily shook her head. “Thanks, really, but I can make it from here. You shouldn’t keep Danyal waiting.”

This time, James didn’t fight her. He just gave her a smile, bittersweet and heavy with goodbyes, and then he turned his back to her. Lily lingered and watched him leave, counting her heartbeats until she no longer felt fragile as a paper swing.

For her own sake, she ought to head back to Gryffindor Tower, slide into bed beside Mei-Lin and talk about the newspaper and Will’s ill-fated crush on Remus until sleep took her. She was emotionally exhausted, which was more tiring than forsaking sleep for a day. Unfortunately, Lily couldn’t return to bed. There was still the matter of Sirius wandering the grounds with mystery plans, heading towards the Quidditch Pitch, which was in the same direction of the boat house. The same boat house where James and Danyal – both suspects – were purportedly meeting. She smelled the Grindylows.

Cautiously, Lily crept from the Great Hall, past the Entrance Courtyard. A path of wide stone steps led to the boat house, winding downward so that Lily feared that she might round a corner and bump into James every few steps. The lanterns along the walkway cast enough light to see only directly in front of her, and she nearly stepped on a mouse that scurried past her feet.
Near the bottom of the path, Lily heard voices and immediately launched into a crouch. One of the voices was distinctly male and very well could have belonged to James. The other, female, might have belonged to Danyal. The voices faded almost entirely when the door of the boathouse closed behind the conversers.

Careful to make as little noise as possible, Lily crept down the remaining steps. The wooden door didn’t have a window, so Lily was reduced to peeping through the keyhole, an entirely ineffective strategy as it turned out. For a minute, Lily waffled, unsure what she ought to do. If she burst in, James would understandably take the interruption as a sign that Lily was still jealous and had learned nothing from their conversation, jeopardizing her relationship with Sirius and any chance at friendship with James, but, on the other hand, she might never have as golden an opportunity to spot out members of the Grindylows.

If only there was a place to the side of the path where she could conceal herself, Lily might have waited until their meeting had ended to see who left the boathouse, but there was no hiding place anywhere along the path. She’d have to sit in bold view of her targets on the stairs.

While the door was heavy, it occurred to Lily that she still ought to be able to hear some hint of voices drifting through from the other side, but she heard none. All was silent except for the occasional caw of a seagull soaring overhead.

Why go to a boathouse if not to commandeer a boat?

Lily pushed open the door without another second’s thought. Sure enough, the boathouse was empty. At a run, Lily went to the water’s edge, peering out over the dark water for any sign of a boat sailing away. She couldn’t see anything, so she risked a *lumos maximus*. The spell illuminated the lake to its farthest coast. She could see out in every direction. There was no sign of a boat.

Desperate, Lily scanned the water several times over, and after that the skies, like they might have flown away, but the light revealed nothing but stars. Next, Lily checked the rafters overhead where the boats were housed. Each space was filled with its designated boat with none missing.

She’d lost them.
Chapter Notes

So I'm back and delivering with the Drama. Get ready for it.

You all owe a major thank you to Corina for beta'ing this chapter. She kind of went above and beyond her duties here, helping me to solve some sticky structural issues that had plagued me for months.

Can't wait to hear what you all think!

In the week plus since losing sight of her targets at the boathouse, Lily had dedicated every spare minute of her time to searching the place for clues. On the night she’d followed the mystery voices, she’d nearly frozen to death. She’d touched every boat that hung in the rafters above to assure herself they were solid, not illusions, and that none were missing; she’d commandeered a telescope from the Astronomy Tower, so that she could better peer out over the lake; and, she’d tapped every plank of flooring to search for hidden passages. No dice.

It was now a Sunday, a balmy weekend afternoon. Lily had convinced Mei-Lin and Will to join her in searching the boathouse. Until now, she’d selfishly coveted her one, solid lead, hesitant to bring in a second or third pair of eyes. Nine days since she’d first connected the boathouse to the Grindylows, and she was finally ready to admit defeat.

Predictably, Will wasn’t much help. Propped on a stool in the corner, he grandstanded unabashedly. Mei-Lin wasn’t afraid of dirty work, fortunately, and she’d dropped to her knees to scour the floor for footprints. Afterwards, she dipped her hands into the water, running her fingertips along the wall algae-coated wall. The floor was slick with grime, and Lily didn’t envy Mei-Lin the task.

“You’re 110 percent sure that Potter wasn’t just telling the truth? That he didn’t come in here to shag Shafiq?” Will said.

Lily, who was fingering everything on the shelves by the northside of the dock, tugged on a coil of rope and frowned. “Well, no. It could have been a…date, but that doesn’t explain why he disappeared. Also, it was bloody freezing. Who would take their pants off in that? It’s just too suspicious.”

None of Will’s naysaying was original to Lily. She’d ruminated on all of the possibilities obsessively for nine days. It could have been a date with Danyal. James could have brought the Slytherin prefect down to the boathouse to show off his knowledge of hidden passages and then secreted her away before Lily burst in to find them. This theory failed to account for Sirius wandering the grounds or the fact that Lily hadn’t found a passageway out of the boathouse.

From her spot on the floor, Mei-Lin said, “Speaking of suspicious, do you know who’s not? Marlene.”

“She still doesn’t do anything?” Lily asked.

“Oh, she does things. Constantly. Never takes a break! Just none that are related to the Grindylows,”
Marlene said sourly. “She makes rounds, Lily!”

Since she’d begun spying on Marlene, Mei-Lin had kept Lily grumpily abreast of their dormmate’s movements. The rounds Mei-Lin referred to consisted of Marlene’s compulsive habit of speaking to every sixth-year once a day. She’d circle the Great Hall, passing out hellos like candy. Mei-Lin swore that Marlene was such a butterfly, she might fly away at any moment.

“Meaning she’s popular. Meaning the Grindylows,” Lily said.

“Do you actually think Marlene McKinnon is smart enough to be a member of the Grindylows, or is this just an inventive form of torture you’ve created for Mei-Lin?” Will asked. “Please know that you have my wholehearted support either way.”

“Well…she’s not on my top list of guesses,” Lily admitted, sidling toward another shelf of boating supplies.

One of Mei-Lin’s many observations about Marlene had included some horrifying insight into Marlene’s limited understanding of geography, revealed during their dormmate’s conversation with Napoleon Shacklebolt. Namely, Marlene believed Hispanic people were from the Middle East. Lily had said it simply showed Marlene wasn’t well-versed in the facts of the world, blamed Hogwarts’ dismal educational standards; Mei-Lin said it showed Marlene was “an idiot.”

“Are you kidding me?” Mei-Lin demanded.

“Sorry. I’ve been working on my list of suspects, and she’s a definite possibility, but I think I have nine stronger candidates,” Lily said apologetically. Will looked eager to hear more, so Lily continued, “These are only my guesses for the sixth-years, and keep in mind that there needs to be at least one from each house. I think the members are: James, Sirius, Remus, Tristan Codrington, Danyal Shafiq, Rita Slughorn, Sev, Tamyra Booth, and Momoko Suzuki.”

“Lily, that’s not half bad,” Mei-Lin said admiringly.

“That’s atrocious,” Will said, equally stunned.

Lily decided to ignore the criticism in favor of beaming at Mei-Lin. She’d gone through several drafts of top picks before landing on her current list. She was the most confident about James, Sirius, Remus, Danyal, and Sev, which left her with four open slots.

Tristan Codrington was popular, and how could he be otherwise with cheekbones like that? The Ravenclaw was decidedly fit, and he was dating one of the most popular girls in school, Nadia Kovalenko. On top of that, he played for the Ravenclaw house team, was a member of the Potions Society, and an invitee to the Slug Club. Accomplished? Check. Popular? Double check.

Rita Slughorn (niece of Horace Slughorn) had received a perfect score from Lily in terms of accomplishments, the only sixth-year to do so as Lily hadn’t rated herself, an exercise that would have broken the curve. Rita had more than earned her score as a prefect, member of the Potions and Charms Clubs, and frequent attendee of her uncle’s gatherings. Yes, she’d lost a few, well, several points on the popularity score as Lily couldn’t recall the last time she’d seen Rita with anyone other than her housemate, Marion French, but the sheer scale of her activities more than made up for it in Lily’s opinion.

Tamyra Booth, a Ravenclaw, was another case of involvement trumping popularity, though Tamyra did share a higher cache than Rita. If Lily was forced to make a comparison, she would say that Rita was about as popular as Mei-Lin, while Tamyra sat on the same level of the social hierarchy as Lily.
herself. Tamyra was also utterly brilliant with seven OWLs and high marks, all managed while serving as three-term President of the Gobstones Club and as a prefect.

In Momoko Suzuki, Lily thought she’d found a balance. Momo was equally popular and accomplished, though not the standard for either. She was a tutor, member of the Astrological Society, and frequent sight at meetings of the Dueling Society. Better, she hung out with all the most popular girls in Hufflepuff. She may not have been the social force that was her close friend, Nadia Kovalenko, but Momoko was a member of the popular crowd and had attended the last Grindylows party.

“How’d you come up with this shite?” Will huffed.

“I assessed everyone on popularity and their involvement in school activities. If you think you can do better, I have the rankings in my bag,” Lily said archly, nodding toward her satchel by the door.

“Gladly,” Will said, marching to her bag. A second later, Lily heard the tell-tale zip and the sound of papers rustling. Lily didn’t so much as cringe when her tampons went flying and Will scrambled to pick them up. It served him right.

Compared to the castle proper, the underground harbor was less ostentatious. It had been designed for practicality, not presentation, so beyond the shelving, there wasn’t much to explore. Night or day, the single room was lit by lanterns along the wall, but the sun also peeked through; the boathouse was constructed of three walls, opening up to a caved inlet, which led to the lake.

There was one decoration: an empty frame hung opposite the door. It had been empty of its contents every time Lily had visited. Lily approached the portrait now. It depicted a starry night, lit by a full moon. Something about the breadth of the brushstrokes struck her as familiar, but Lily couldn’t put her finger on it. The portrait was oddly large, 1.5 meters by 1.5 meters, and when Lily ran her fingers along the gilded frame, dust coated the digit.

It was entirely out of place.

From behind her, Mei-Lin approached and said, “You know, this would make an excellent entrance to a secret passageway.”

Lily agreed. She dug her fingernails into the edge of the frame and pulled. The thing didn’t budget. Mei-Lin proceeded to tickle, pet, scratch and poke every nanometer of the painting in the hopes of provoking a response. Nothing worked.

“Maybe you have to say the password,” Mei-Lin suggested.

Groaning, Lily prayed that wasn’t the case. The password to Gryffindor Tower was unguessable, exhausting all of the Latin and English languages as it changed every week. Lily’s memory was formidable, so it was rare that she forgot the password into Gryffindor Tower altogether, but she’d been so bursting with energy and excitement during her first year at Hogwarts, that she wouldn’t bother to memorize the password at all. Twice, she’d been left, trapped, outside after curfew. The first night, she’d banged on the portrait of the Fat Lady with heavy fists, ignoring her screams for help, and intent on summoning someone from inside. The ruckus had caught the attention of Filch, not her housemates, and Lily had earned her first Hogwarts detention, even as she begged for mercy, citing her helplessness. The second time, she had given up all hope immediately, slumping to the floor and snuggling into her robes like a blanket. She’d slept for nearly an hour when a shoe nudged her side a few times. It was James and Sirius, password in hand, and they’d let her into the castle amidst much ribbing about her forgetfulness. Since, Lily had never once failed to commit a password to mind.
Knowing that their efforts in the boathouse would be pure conjecture, Lily grimly said, “Open Sesame.”

“I’m afraid of water. I love water. Get your sea-legs. Hard to starboard,” Mei-Lin tried without success. Lily looked at her askance, so Mei-Lin added for her benefit. “I don’t know. I feel like it’ll be nautical themed. The password is…”

Jabbing a quill angrily into Lily’s rankings, Will hissed to himself, “Absurd!”

The portrait creaked open once the final syllable left his mouth. Unprepared, Lily didn’t leap out of the way as the portrait swung back on its hinges and collided directly with her face. Stumbling back, Lily rubbed her nose. It was reddened from impact, but there was no blood. There was no time for pouting, so Lily walked around the portrait, so that she could peer inside. Within the black, yawning space revealed, Lily could faintly make out a flight of steps.

“Well, well, well. What have we here, my pretties?” Lily intoned gleefully.

The reference was entirely lost on Mei-Lin, but her answering grin was still resplendent. They could both scent adventure on the air, spicy and hot. Oftentimes, people questioned their sorting: Lily had the inquisitiveness of a Ravenclaw, and the uninitiated wrongly pegged Mei-Lin as a Hufflepuff. The way their blood quickened now at the prospect of adventure would have put to bed any doubts.

“Um, I’m doing some lifesaving work on this list, so why don’t you two check it out without me?” Will said.

“Coward,” Mei-Lin said.

“I’ve never claimed otherwise,” Will said, shrugging his shoulders.

“So what if it’s dark?” Lily asked. “I highly doubt we’re going to run into anything too dangerous in the middle of the school.”

“Do you attend the same school as me? This is Hogwarts. You’ll be lucky if you don’t get burnt to death by a dragon. Count me out,” Will said.

Mei-Lin might have teased him mercilessly, but forcing Will to do anything was a worthless enterprise. He’d ultimately go, but he would whinge the entire journey, distracting their focus from clue-gathering.

“Fine. We’ll see you later. If we’re not at breakfast tomorrow, report to Dumbledore. Tell him the dragon ate us alive,” Lily instructed.

“I have a great pair of black dress robes that’d be perfect for the occasion,” Will called morbidly as the girls climbed over the low threshold of the frame and into the secret passage.

The staircase spiraled clockwise, like the many barrel staircases that wound through Hogwarts’ towers. Unlike the staircases they climbed every day, this one was unfinished: no railing. In the dark, it would be a simple matter to lose her footing and topple, a graceless return to the boathouse with a few broken bones to mark the journey. Complicating matters, medieval castles were built with uneven staircases, designed to confuse enemy invaders in the dark. Keeping one hand on the wall at all times, Lily made her ascent. The walls were damp, perspiring. Behind her, Mei-Lin shadowed her footsteps.

They arrived at the top and repeated the magical words, “the password is absurd” to emerge in the middle of the Bustling Grand Staircase. A group of fourth-year Slytherins squawked in put-upon
outrage at the sudden interruption, moving resentfully to the side.

The staircase must have been magical because a straight shot up stairs should have launched them into the sky not to the opposite side of the grounds and into the castle proper. Something crackled beneath Lily’s skin, a remnant of magic, not quite as disorienting as an apparition.

“My, my! It’s been some time since anyone’s come through here!”

The portrait from which they’d emerged smiled jovially. Lily realized the empty scene downstairs had looked familiar because it was a perfect match for the portrait of Percival Pratt, the noted poet that shouted rhymes and riddles at her every day as she walked to class.

“Hello, Percival. I didn’t realize you double-functioned as a door, and here I thought you were such a bore,” Mei-Lin said.

Simple or not, a rhyme was always enough to summon a smile to Percival’s face, and it lifted and curled his momentous moustache. Lily wasted no time with pleasantries, jumping straight into her line of questioning.

“Percival, were you here last Friday night? The sixteenth? Here and awake I mean?” Lily asked. He nodded. “Are you sure? Sorry to press, but it’s important.”

“I’m certain. I had Sir Cadogan and dear Glanmore over for a game of cards. I won handily. See the trick is to choose opponents who bring out the worst in the other. Glanmore’s a true hero. Killing the Serpent of Cromer was no easy task, you know. So, Cadogan is driven to distraction trying to prove he’s a hero as well, and it’s a simple matter to get a peek at their cards as they bicker,” Percival said in a whispered aside.

“Did you notice anyone come through the passage that night?” Lily asked.

“No, like I said. It’s been many years since I swung forward without warning like that. You gave me such a shock.”

“Maybe you didn’t see anyone, but you opened just a little,” Mei-Lin bargained.

Percival stayed firm. No matter how they phrased the question, he insisted that no one had used the secret passage from the boathouse in years.

As they walked away in disappointment, Percival chimed in with his parting words, “Just remember, take time every day to rhyme what they say!”

As far as workable guidance went, Lily had hoped for better. There was no time to waste in lamenting the dead end because Lily was slated to meet with James in the common room to work on their Transfiguration project. She may have been perpetually late to everything, but James – James! with his wonderful hair and keen interest in whatever she was researching – was always the exception, no matter how cross she was with him. Or rather, pretending to be as their last few chats had seen her anger ebb away until all that was left was the soft putty of her feelings, crushed but still throbbing with want for him.

Buoyed by her teenage fantasies, Lily beat James to the common room, though he joined her shortly thereafter. A punctual bloke that one. Yes, fit, punctual, and ace at Transfiguration, and she could never sort how such a thing was possible. That said, fifteen minutes into their work session, Lily was prepared to admit that despite his many glowing attributes, James Potter was not a perfect person.

Had someone asked Lily in their fourth-year for a comprehensive list of his shortcomings, she would...
have been eager to provide it, and the parchment would have stretched to the floor in tightly-cramped lettering. Today, in their cozy corner of the common room, Lily would have answered with only one fault: he was utterly tone deaf.

James hummed absentmindedly as he worked, nose pressed to his notes, so the ugly music lilted across the table. He was humming something moody, classical, which started in minor and then, burst brilliantly up an octave, and then another. With the musical range of a crisp, James thoughtlessly strained up to follow the music, voice cracking and whistling like a kettle.

From the moment the noise had started, Lily had debated reaching across the little square table that separated them to give him a thwack across the head. He’d probably look at her with those big, offended eyes, but at least he’d stop with the screeching. What stayed Lily’s hand was his contributions to their project, relative to her own. Namely, while he poured through notes and outlined their project, Lily was reading a magazine article on Helen Bamber, the head of Amnesty International’s British Group and the founder of their Medical Group. Lily might have tried to help, but every time she read the start of her Transfiguration textbook, her eyes glossed over and the crushing reality of the imminence of death made her feel seasick, so she’d retreat back to something that didn’t make her miserable. James had been a wonderful sport about it all.

“Here’s an idea,” James said, stopping his infernal humming only to force her to think about Transfiguration instead, which wasn’t exactly an improvement. “We could make the theme of our project miracles and magic in muggle mysticism. You like to research, so you can do the reading up on different transfigurations famous in muggle theology, and I can handle the practical side. We recreate the transfigurations, photograph and contextualize it all within the mythology, and we earn ourselves an O, while learning something new about muggle culture.”

“What do you mean by miracles in muggle mysticism?” Lily asked. It was pathetic, but she felt positively tingly at hearing James talk in academic terms with her. His intellect and love of learning was the most embarrassing turn-on in history.

“Like, this Jesus bloke. He transforms clay into birds, for example. There’s a lot of food transfigurations, too, which are tricky because, you know, Gamp’s Laws, but we could do at least a physical transfiguration.”

Lily exhaled slowly. “James, Jesus was not a wizard. What he did was not transfiguration.”

“Yes, actually. They’re miracles. Last time I checked, a wizard couldn’t raise the dead. And, like you already pointed out, Gamp’s Laws. He could also turn water into wine. They were miracles. Not magic.”

Hands raised in front of him, James said, “I take it back. Bad idea, sorry.”

Only at his conciliatory stance did Lily realize that she was gnashing her teeth together and poised as if to lunge across the table. Lily folded her hands together and leaned back, forcing calm into existence. James hadn’t meant anything by his bumbling about because wizards lacked the background to understand muggle religions. And, frankly, Lily couldn’t blame James for not believing, because she wasn’t certain of her own stance; at times the gentle cadence of prayer and generous words of the New Testament rang hollow to her too. Despite her own vacillating, Lily would never mock believers because that was Petunia, her mum, a litany of good-natured people who complimented her Sunday dress and shared fresh-baked cookies after the service.

She’d been raised up in the C of E by a mother who was devout and unbending when it came to her
daughters’ religious education. Until her mother grew sick, Lily had never missed a Sunday service, even when she was a walking contagion with chicken pox or the flu. It had been a shock when her father didn’t take them. They’d dress and leave the house as if they were heading to church, but it was a ruse to fool their bedridden mother, instead visiting an ice cream parlor, the sweet vanilla overcoming any of Lily’s nerves about their waning attendance. Her father had said a loving god would never make their family suffer so deeply and that he wouldn’t worship a cruel god. A year and a half later, Lily had made a go of attending church again alongside Petunia, but by then everything was different. She had met Severus, and she knew she was a witch, and the command ‘Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live’ struck her, deep and discordant, their humble chapel heating up like a pyre as Lily sweat in her pew, realizing that maybe the Bible wasn’t written for her after all.

Apologetic, Lily decided to backtrack from her ferocity if not the content of what she’d argued, “It’s not an awful idea, James. I just think a lot of wizards view muggles as silly and superstitious, but they’re not dumb. They’re thoughtful and smart and willing to learn, and we shouldn’t do anything in this project that’s going to contribute to the idea that they’re less than they are.”

“You know I think the world of muggles. I just wasn’t thinking. Let’s circle back to one of our other ideas,” James offered. To emphasize his point, James drew a quick triangle around another idea he’d been considering, pertaining to size experimentation. It wasn’t more than a minute before James looked at her again and voiced a new question, “Does that mean you’re a Christian? You believe in that stuff…I mean, err, religion?”

Somewhat bashfully, Lily admitted that she didn’t. “I believe there is a god, whether that’s a source of energy or something so immense I can’t begin to fathom it. I think God is the source of benevolence, that all love emanates from Him. I believe that every human being has a soul, which is something separate from our brains and consciousness, something stronger than the brain, which will outlive the body. I’m maybe a bit binary in how I think about good and evil, and I believe that good people are rewarded while bad people suffer in the afterlife. It’s, well, it’s important to me that there’s a Heaven. I need to believe my mum is somewhere beautiful. And, I believe in Hell. I need to believe that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and the others like him are going to suffer for what they’ve done.”

James whistled, and the note was ten times prettier than his previous humming. “Beautiful. Honestly.”

“Yeah?” Lily asked sheepishly, warring with the wave of terror that clutched her whenever she admitted out loud that she wasn’t certain Jesus had died for her sins and all the rest.

“Absolutely. You make me wish I believed, too. I’ve just never taken the time to think about it all: death and the universe and purpose. Like I said though, the way you talk about it is beautiful,” James said.

“Are you an objectivist? Like, you don’t believe in anything unless there’s concrete evidence?” Lily questioned.

Earlier, she’d snagged a crocheted blanket from the couch, burgundy with the Gryffindor lion in yellow thread, and she played with the fraying tassels rather than look at James. She was half afraid he would say yes because she’d never been able to reconcile the evidence-hungry rational side of herself with the need for something soft and mystical in the universe. There were plenty of scientists and thinkers that accepted the existence of God, but there were others that were leading a vocal movement in favor of atheism. Lily felt caught in the middle between two warring movements and facets of self.

“Not at all! Have you never noticed my hundred and one superstitions? Some things are just true,
and I don’t need to know why.”

“Err, no?”

“Oh blimey, ask Remus. I drive him mad with them, but I don’t believe in taking chances,” James said with an astonishing amount of heat in his voice.

“You don’t believe in taking chances?”

“Not with the forces of the universe. I’ll take a chance with the forces of gravity, manners, and McGonagall, but I’m not risking anything else. I figured out pretty young that I have the best luck in the universe, and you don’t get something for nothing. If I’m not careful, I could lose it all, wake up and Sleekeazy’s gone under, my parents have divorced, and I’ve body-swapped with Filch. Not risking it!” James said.

At Lily’s pressing, James shared a few of his superstitions, and Lily was left to marvel at how she’d never noticed what a freak he was, darting about the castle in accordance with imaginary laws that no one else adhered to. If he woke up in the morning and it was raining, he wouldn’t shower for the entire day – a rule that had destroyed the peace of the boys’ dormitory in the spring of 1974, when it rained for two weeks straight – and if the rain started up after dinner, James would take another, regardless of whether he’d already showered that morning. He ate his food in alphabetical order like an absolute monster, dessert and drinks being the only permissible exceptions. Tuesdays were ripe with bad luck, so he tried to avoid anything important, saving it ideally for Thursday’s wondrous luck. If he cast a spell and it backfired or the results were less than desired, he would tap the wand four times on the nearest wooden surface and murmur an incantation that sounded like a nursery rhyme to “erase my wand’s memory of failure.” And, he believed that if someone bumped into you on the left-side on your birthday, that person wished you harm.

Evidently, Lily had done just that when they were in second-year, which led to an intense debate.

“I did not wish you harm!” Lily insisted.

“You hated me! You hated me, and you collided with my left-side as we left Charms. I’ll never forget it. You waltzed off, and I just stood there, shocked! Because, there I thought you were ace at those bubbling charms, and you were plotting my murder. It scarred me!”

“You’re making this up,” Lily said.

“No! Ask Sirius! I stayed away from you for weeks after because I was convinced you were just looking for an opening.”

“What are you supposed to be asking me?” Sirius drew close by their table. He’d spent the last hour asleep in the corner, a motorcycle racing magazine splayed open across his knees. Now, he and James did some elaborate boy-mate greeting with their hands before Sirius threw himself into the chair by James’ side.

“Was I not terrified of her in second-year? After the shite she pulled on my birthday!” James said to Sirius.

“Oh, yeah, you were ridiculous,” Sirius seconded immediately. “We took some weird shortcuts through the castle to make sure we were never alone in a corridor with you. Not sure how you were going to overpower the four of us, but James took no chances.”

“Ridiculous,” Lily said. “What finally convinced you that I didn’t want you dead?”
“Easy. You were the first person to say hello to me on the first day of Spring,” James said.

“What?”

“Whoever first says hello to you at the start of Spring is secretly in love with you. Figured that your animosity had morphed into love because naturally. Who wouldn’t love me?”

No matter how vehemently she denied it, Lily could not convince James that she hadn’t harbored a secret crush on him in their second-year. As they bickered, Sirius relaxed entirely into his seat and closed his eyes, a smile on his face. They folded into something that felt perfectly natural, a rhythm of James working on their project, Lily protesting something she found absurd, and Sirius butting in with a pithy aside that set James reeling with laughter. The only moments that jolted Lily out of her own contentment were when Sirius would touch her unexpectedly, a brush against her wrist or their knees knocking beneath the coffee table. It, unlike everything else, wasn’t natural, and she couldn’t hide the jolt that rocked her each time.

Because everything felt so comfortable, Lily allowed nearly a half hour to pass before she realized she was letting a perfect opportunity drip like water through her fingers. She has two all-but-confirmed members of the Grindylows at her disposal and she was basking in their company without so much as a probing question. Dating Sirius Black wasn’t meant to be a pleasure cruise. It was meant to be a deep, personally draining investigation into the underbelly of the school.

Lily grew quiet as she raced through her mental catalogue of mysteries that needed solving and the various angles she might take to introduce her chosen line of questioning. When she settled upon one, she looked up from her book with what she imagined was her most innocent smile in place.

“I think it’s impossible to keep a secret nowadays,” Lily said, aiming for contemplative.

James’s attention was torn between the work he was doing on their project and a game of tic-tac-toe that Sirius had started on the margins of his notes, so he only grunted in response to her opening line.

Lily was not deterred.

“Think about it,” Lily rallied. “The world’s smaller than ever. Pick a country and you can travel to it, muggle or witch! So, we know more about our neighbors than ever before, and news from around the world affects us more today than ever before. The secrets are disappearing. Soon, we’re going to know everything. There will be no place to hide.”

Sirius shook his head. “I could not disagree more. We have too many secrets still. Look at my family. We have all sorts of secret practices, crimes, traditions, and more that haven’t spread outside the House of Black, and I promise you all the old families are alike. Then, there’s the Ministry. Sure, they’re leaking information left and right, but the state of the Prophet is abysmal, and you never know what information is true or false. Too many double agents.”

“We have our fair share of secrets, too,” James said chummily.

“Some of us have too many,” Sirius returned.

Neither of them said a word after that, turning away to stare in opposite directions. Lily disliked having her clumsy opening dissected so thoroughly, and she worried that changing tactics now would be too obvious, so she tried again.

“Alright, maybe not in your world…but in the muggle world! Look at Richard Nixon!”

“Who?”
“Richard Nixon! He was a leader of the muggle United States. He tried to tamper with the elections by spying on the opposition, only his spies were caught out. And, they didn’t keep their orders or who ordered it a secret. They tried for a bit, but the whole case cracked right open because it’s impossible to *keep* a secret. Maybe you can hide things for a few months or hell, even a few years, but you can’t shield the truth for longer than that. Give it half a century and the truth will win out.” Lily said.

“Or maybe people just won’t care about what happened half a century in the past,” James pointed out.

Pretending as if he hadn’t spoken, Lily said, “Which is why I think the Grindylows are so incredible, if you think about it. Because that’s a secret that’s been maintained for a long time. A few centuries at least, right? And no one’s ever broken and spilled the truth. I can hardly make sense of how they’ve managed to get that many people to keep a secret for that long.”

“Maybe they only pick the best secret keepers,” Sirius offered, and Lily frowned at his insincerity.

“I’ve thought about it, and I think you’d need to have a pretty strong system in place to demand compliance. These are the options: One, you threaten them. The Grindylows are a secretly violent organization and betrayal equals death or maiming or, I suppose some kind of career-jettisoning. Or, you know, there are these muggle secret societies, and some of them have a practice, where the members expose their gravest secrets and worst acts, so that they’re afraid to ever betray the society lest their secrets be exposed,” Lily said.

James gaped at her. “I don’t think the Grindylows are out there massacring past members. It’s a school club.”

“I’m just brainstorming,” Lily said primly. “Two, they could bribe them. Maybe they’re paid to keep silent, and they receive more of their payoff each year.”

“Nah, that wouldn’t work with half the old families,” Sirius said immediately.

“Three, they use magic. An Unbreakable Vow would do the trick nicely,” Lily said.

“Again, I don’t think they’re operating on pain of death,” James protested.

Lily wouldn’t lie, she was relieved to hear it. Still, she doubted hundreds of people could keep a lifetime of silence unless there was some element of fear keeping that quiet. The more she talked through the options, the more convinced she became that the Grindylows used some combination of all three options. There was some degree of threat to keep people in line, a degree of reward to act as a balm against the leash – maybe as simple as social and political advantages amongst the members? – and there was something magical to seal it all together. Maybe an Unbreakable Vow was too extreme, but Lily knew there were other spells that could bind a promise, if less strictly, and she’d have to do some research to explore her options.

Lily feigned a sigh. “You’re probably right. I bet you that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named uses these methods, though.”

That set James and Sirius both off into a rant about the current political situation, and Lily let the subject of the Grindylows drop entirely. Hearing James and Sirius both protest against the madness of Lord Voldemort was comforting, a reminder that not every pureblood was pure-evil, and she surprised by the time when their scheduled hour was up and James had to leave for Quidditch practice. The final match of the season against Hufflepuff, to determine the champion, was right around the corner, and James wouldn’t be kept from practice for anything.
Left alone, neither Lily nor Sirius said anything for a minute. He didn’t need to. From the way he kept glancing at the portrait hole, Lily knew he wanted to get away from the amassing crowd of Gryffindors that had filled up the common room. In need of some fresh air herself, Lily proposed they take a walk if he wasn’t busy. She always felt the need to add on the caveat, to remind him that it was all at his pleasure. Their relationship was too insubstantial in her hands to make assumptions.

They walked amiably, hand in hand. Sirius didn’t say much of anything, but Lily didn’t think he was unhappy. His mood was silent but pleasant, and she was happy to provide the conversation. By the time they made it outside to the grounds, she’d told him all about her classes, a funny joke Will had nearly murdered her with, and the uneventful story of her last trip to the cinema.

When their faces met sun and air as they exited the castle, both Lily and Sirius expelled synchronized sighs of relief. Lily rolled her neck, luxuriating in the way the sun beat down on her bare skin, threatening freckles with every second. Beside her, Sirius shucked off his robes and with it the cast of his silence, growing more outspoken and alive. He was left in some band t-shirt and trousers, rolled at the cuff.

“I love when the weather warms,” Lily said, leading the way to nowhere in particular. Sirius following dutifully along. “I hate being cooped up in the castle during the winter. I spent my whole childhood outside.”

Suffering had defined Mrs. Evans’ existence, but the one thing she would not suffer was the sight of one of her girls indoors on a “perfectly good day.” She was always chasing Petunia out of the house with strict orders not to return until dinner. Preferring the mindless lull of the telly to frolicking outside, Petunia would try to sneak back in, timing her attempts to when their mum was hanging up the washing and sprinting to the sanctity of her bedroom. The time her mum had caught Petunia crawling across the kitchen floor would always stay tattooed to Lily’s brain. Rather than order her out with words, Adelaide Evans had continued the task at hand: sweeping the kitchen clean of dirt. If she happened to swipe up Petunia in the process and give her a few brisk whacks with the bristles, well that was just a happy bonus.

Lily, on the other hand, hadn’t needed to be told twice. Their house didn’t have an AC, so it was too hot to stay inside on a summer’s day, and the cramped walls of her home simply didn’t hold enough adventure to keep her entertained. Nothing much happened in Cokeworth, but a natural-born conspiracy theorist, Lily could concoct a dastardly plot from a few grains of sand, and she’d spend hours combing the neighborhood for clues that the cotton mill was brainwashing the town by dropping chemicals in the river or that the school was actually run by witches (the irony was not lost on her). And when she tired of that, there was always the park, where she would swing until the ground no longer felt like home, until she belonged to the air.

As Lily explained her childhood proclivities to Sirius, he hung on her every word, like her stories of a typical childhood were as intoxicating as the firewhiskey hidden in his pockets. It was when he questioned how a slide worked that Lily couldn’t help but ask how he’d spent his own childhood.

Sirius didn’t answer for a long time, like he was debating how to frame his childhood. “I was...under-stimulated as a boy. Most children get their attention from their parents, but mine were never around. Sometimes I’d see my mum when she was keeping the house, but that was usually a sign to run the other direction because she was bellowing about phantom dust and out for blood. My father...Orion, well, if he wasn’t at his club, he was locked away in his study and going anywhere near it was...unpleasant.”

“It sounds so lonely.”

“It was.”
“I’m sorry,” Lily said honestly.

“Don’t be. It taught me an important lesson. I spent my childhood hiding and shrinking away from the things I wanted because I was afraid of the consequences. That’s over now. I’m not scared of anything or anyone, and if I want something, I’ll go for it.”

Unbidden, tears rose up in Lily’s eyes, and she blinked them away frantically. That line of thinking was just too familiar. From the time she was diagnosed through the chemo and to the end, Adelaide Evans had spent less than two weeks combined in the hospital. Instead, the family had transformed the master bedroom into a sickroom. Retreating to the hospital felt like a capitulation to the cancer. And in that final, long-enduring week -- so long that Lily sometimes wondered whether this wasn’t just a dream, and she wasn’t still trapped in those six lingering days -- they finally caved, and Adelaide was admitted to the hospital.

There was a conspiracy, woven by the doctors, the nurses, her mother, father, and the janitorial staff to ensure that Petunia and Lily were never left alone with their mother during those final days. Weak and often confused, their mother would hallucinate, talk about things that didn’t make sense and scare the lights out of the girls, so an adult was always present to run interference, to explain.

In a comedy of errors, however, Lily was left alone with her mother for several precious minutes. Her father and Petunia were in the cafeteria for lunch, and the nurse that had agreed to supervise had raced off to help a patient coding in the next room.

Nervously, Lily had crept close to the bed. Her mother was sweating and had balled all of the sheets up at the edge of the bed. Lily hadn’t wanted to touch her and make it worse. Everyone had told her that mummy wasn’t contagious, but she wasn’t sure whether she ought to believe them. Petunia had given her the chicken pox only the year before.

Lucid, her mum had looked straight at her, more present than Lily could ever remember in her life, like her mum was seeing her for the first and last time. Lily had frozen under that stare. She knew that what came next would change the course of her short, uneventful life.

And it had.

Adelaide could barely get the words out, speaking in the pained whisper of the dying, but Lily had heard every word. Adelaide talked about her dreams. It had never occurred to Lily that her mum could desire anything outside of taking care of her and Petunia, but she recounted a full childhood of her own, her desires of becoming a licensed veterinarian and living out in the country, nursing horses and cattle back to health. A whole host of unfulfilled dreams.

And all she kept saying, on repeat, was, “I didn’t think it would be this short. I didn’t think it would be this short.”

Lily had internalized her mother’s words, and it seemed Sirius had learned much the same lesson from life.

“But what about your brother?” Lily said, after she’d collected herself. “He must have spent time with you.”

They were coming up on the Quidditch Pitch. Her feet, unbidden, had guided her to James. It was impossible to pick out the individual players as they zoomed above the crisp green field, but Lily thought she could identify him anyway. There was one player, drifting higher than the others, and she liked to think it was James. Who else would always take it to the extreme? A fleck of red in the sky, from a distance the players could be mistaken for birds, until they moved, brooms twisting them
in directions and angles that birds could never replicate.

Sirius watched the players too, though with less interest as he answered her question, “Rex wasn’t much of a playmate because he was too terrified of making a lick of noise and bringing mum down upon us both. We had tutors during the week, and Friday nights the whole Black clan gathered, which was something unpleasant but never boring.”

“What about friends?” Lily tried again.

Sirius laughed, “Lily, stop looking for a last-minute savior. This story doesn’t have one. Not until I met James and Peter and Remus, at least. We weren’t permitted to wander around and didn’t have much of a yard, so no friends. It was just me in that empty house. I completed a lot of puzzles because toys were infra dig for the Black family...also so much shopping. Anything related to taste was an acceptable pastime, so I’d pour through catalogues, circling the items I’d purchase. I’d sketch out entire rooms and how I’d fill them. For a few years, I wrote my own magazine -- just sheets of parchment held together with a bent corner. I’d write reviews of every piece in the catalogues, scathing pieces like I’d been mortally wounded by the ostentatiousness of a paisley sofa.”

“That explains a lot,” Lily muttered. Just yesterday he’d made a comment about her matching a yellow scarf with her red trainers.

“Old habits,” Sirius laughed. “But now I’m a disinherited ligger, so I’m sure I’ll grow out of it.”

Lily shook her head in disbelief. “How can one person say ‘infra dig’ and ‘ligger’ over the course of a minute?”

“Perhaps that person is ashamed of being the sort to say ‘infra dig’ and curses to cover their posh habits,” Sirius said.

“So you swear to make people forget you say things like that,” Lily teased.

“That and my parents despise it.”

“But they don’t know you’re doing it!”

“I have a robust imagination,” Sirius said. He was smirking. “Do you feel sorry for me, Lily?”

Talk about a trick question. Lily averted her eyes. They’d come upon the broom shed, a squat brick structure that Lily had never been inside before as she never had cause to fetch a broomstick.

One moment, Lily was idly observing the broom shed. The very next, her back was pressed up against the uneven cut brick walls with Sirius looming over her.

“What are you - oh!” Lily squealed.

He was kissing her before she could finish the thought.

Oh, that.

Obviously, Lily had known going into this relationship that Sirius was going to have expectations. No teenage boy wanted to be in a relationship restricted to platonic hand-holding. Finding a balance had proven difficult. On the one hand, drunk Lily clearly hadn’t minded the prospect of snogging Sirius, and it wasn’t as if she didn’t find him attractive. On the other, her motives were a twisted mess, and she could never relax. Fortunately, Sirius wasn’t going to push her beyond the inevitable hemming and hawing of every teenage boy, and there was an expectation that girls her age might
want to prolong intimacy, so Sirius didn’t find it too suspicious. Unfortunately, since he assumed she just a nervous virgin, he also thought she could be slowly seduced, led to the water like a fidgety horse.

The kiss was teasing. Sirius kept both of his hands on the trunk for purchase and would lean forward to deepen the kiss only to slip out of reach when he felt Lily begin to return it. All the lies in the world weren’t enough to tamp down her hormones, so Lily found herself chasing his lips each time. After the fifth time he evaded her, she pouted.

“Aww,” Sirius cooed. He tapped her bottom lip with his forefinger.

“Move the finger, or I’ll bite it,” Lily warned.

“I don’t know why you’re whining. I’m just respecting your boundaries, taking things slow,” Sirius said, laughing at her.

“You’re a git.”

With what she would have described as a giggle from anyone else, Sirius took her by the wrist and dragged her inside the broom shed. It was neat, scrubbed clean of spiderwebs and organized by broom size thanks to a few overenthusiastic third-years eager to make their respective house teams. A stack of boxes, housing broomstick polish, made a perfect perch for a girl her height, and Sirius wasted no time dropping her onto the makeshift ledge.

Sirius kissed her again, but this time he wasn’t teasing. His left hand ran gently up and down, petting and prodding her side, and lingering along the bra strap, and his other hand tangled in her hair. With it, he pulled so that her neck arched, and he could plunder her mouth; she was swooning.

After ten minutes of this, Lily pulled away gasping. Sirius removed his hand from her hair to grip her by the waist, but Lily batted his hands away. She needed space to get her head on straight because her pulse indicated she was seconds away from a heart attack.

“Okay. Okay,” Lily said, practically hyperventilating. “Time to reintroduce those boundaries and concerns about taking things slow.”

Sirius drew away, putting some much-needed distance between them. He was nearly as shaken as she was, though he concealed it better. Breathing appeared to be an effort, and his chest fell and rose heavily with each intake of air. Regaining himself, Sirius said something about it being nearly time to head to the Great Hall for dinner.

Lily was hungry, but her mind was far from thoughts of dinner. It had suddenly occurred to her that Sirius’s interest in her didn’t add up. There were plenty of girls in the castle, beautiful or smart or funny in their own right, who would do more than over-the-shirt snogging in a broom cupboard. Plenty who had done more with him. That he was panting and unsatisfied with her made no sense.

“Why are you with me?” Lily asked. “I mean, I won’t even let you take my shirt off.”

“What kind of boys have you been dating that would make you say something like that?” Sirius demanded.

“The teenage kind.”

That earned a laugh. “Fair enough. We get on well, don’t we, Lily? That’s why I’m with you. You’re a riot. I can never predict what waste of time, craziness you’re about to embark on. And you’re never needy, never nag me for something I’m not going to give. I like that about you.”
“Okay, you like me because I’m low-maintenance and weird? But that still doesn’t...why’d you agree to go out with me in the first place?” Lily pressed.

“I don’t like to tell pretty girls no,” Sirius said. When Lily raised an eyebrow, he sighed and continued, “And well, I suppose I liked the reactions it got out of people, too.”

“Mary?”

“No, I told you that I’m not worried about Mary.”

Lily had managed to hunt down Sirius to talk about Mary after he ignored her on the grounds the week before. She’d told him all of her concerns about Mary in detail, including Mary’s newfound interest in her, and given him a one-time chance to back out of their relationship with no drama. Rather than rush off to Mary, Sirius had reassured Lily that she was misunderstanding the situation, that Mary MacDonald didn’t feel jealousy. (Actually, he said something along the lines of Mary not being able to feel anything at all, but it had been very rude, and Lily had pinched him for it.)

“Then, who? Severus?” Lily tried again.

“Spoiling his year is a bonus. I can’t lie,” Sirius said through the widest grin she’d ever seen on him.

“If not Sev, then who?” Lily asked.

A possibility occurred to her, and it competed to be her worst nightmare and greatest dream in one. He’d been rowing with James for a month now, the length of her relationship with Sirius, and it was obvious, in retrospect, that they’d already had their falling out at the Grindylows party where she first hooked up with Sirius. Whether James had genuine feelings for her or not (he didn’t), that wouldn’t prevent him from feelings of possessiveness. Boys could be like that, or so Lily had read. James didn’t want her, but he considered her his all the same, and Sirius ignoring James’ “claim” would be an insult.

“James?” Lily asked, dreading the answer.

Sirius’s response was explosive.

“No!” He practically shouted the word. “No, I would never-I can’t believe you even think...No!”

“Well, you’ve been at each other’s throats,” Lily said defensively. How could she think that, indeed!

“Yes, we’ve been rowing, and yes, I never would have gone out with you if we weren’t, but that’s just because I knew it would piss him off to all end. With us fighting, I wasn’t worried about his feelings one way or another, but I didn’t - wouldn’t - go out of my way to hurt him. Merlin! I’m-”

“Relax, relax. I was just asking,” Lily said hurriedly.

The veins in Sirius’s neck were all straining under the stress of his reaction. He was angry with her, but Lily wondered whether the strength of his response wasn’t born of disgust at himself.

“I’m right pissed at James, but that has nothing to do with you,” Sirius said.

It was the same assurance that James had already offered her, but only now could Lily relax completely. She’d needed to hear it from the both of them.

“Course, James doesn’t see it the same way.”

And just when she thought things were getting easy.
There was nothing like exercise to work up an appetite, and by the time dinner rolled around, Lily’s stomach had expanded, swallowing up her kidneys, liver, and intestines, transforming into a monstrous thing. It bellowed for food, urging her to inhale a dinner roll and dive face first into the Yorkshire pudding.

The ravenous beast that had once been called Lily Evans didn’t spare a glance for her classmates at the Gryffindor table. If she or rather, it had, it would have seen that she was sitting in foreign territory – to call it behind enemy lines would have been needlessly dramatic, but she was certainly outside her comfort zone.

Without Lily noticing, the table around her had filled with the most popular students in Gryffindor house – Michaela Curtis, Cheryl O’Hannigan, Ken Price, Annie Powell. Just about the only people she was remotely comfortable with were Sirius to her left and Marlene opposite her at a diagonal.

After plowing through a plate of green beans, two servings of pudding, and chugging her pumpkin juice, Lily finally returned to her body. A thumb jutted into Lily’s line of vision. The dark thumb, white around the knuckle wiggled like a challenge. If any thumb could be described as arrogant, it would be this thumb. Astonished, Lily glanced to her right to see Michaela Curtis watching her expectantly. Lily wasn’t sure what she was supposed to do with a thumb jutting into her personal space, so she just tapped it awkwardly with her own, like a stubby high-five.

“Evans, it’s a thumb war,” Michaela said. When Lily continued to stare at her without recognition, Michaela moved onto Sirius. She leaned right over Lily, blocking off the dinner table and the food in the process, to engage Sirius in a heated thumb war. A few minutes earlier, Lily might have murdered Michaela for coming between her and the food.

“Can you believe we’re less than two months out from NEWTs?” Ken Price asked.

Cheryl O’Hannigan, who was squinting over a Transfiguration tome, spared a second to glare. “No, I had no idea. I’m just reading at the dinner table because I can’t stomach your company.”

“You know, I think the sorting hat only got the half of it,” Sirius said, eyes trained on Michaela Curtis’s darting thumb, “They should add sarcastic to daring and bold. You lot can’t say a word with sincerity.”

“How’s this? You’re sincerely shite at thumb wrestling,” Michaela said, capturing both Sirius’s thumb and the victory.

With their match over, Lily was able to once more reach her plate and settled in at a more sedate, human pace on the stewed carrots. Mei-Lin was nowhere in sight, which meant Lily would have to beg for mercy once she was back in the dormitory. A good friend would have saved her a seat. Figuring a gift of food might smooth the way to forgiveness, Lily slathered a roll in butter so that it was sticky to the touch and positively dripping – just the way Mei-Lin liked it – and tucked it safely in a napkin. As she worked with her right hand, Lily’s left hand was busy spearing carrots. She was still hungry.

A tawny owl soared through the open windows into the Great Hall. Lily didn’t think much of it as owls often interrupted the dinner hour if their recipient hadn’t been available during breakfast. When it redirected and made straight for Lily, she paused her eating. In six years, she’d never received so much mail in one month. Petunia must not know how to live without her for a week at a time. That or she’d found Lily a summer job and wanted to tell her...or, something terrible had happened to their father. A tray of eggs sat in front of her, and Lily focused on the cheery yolks, which jiggled and
then settled whenever someone knocked into the table. The eggs were too normal and domestic. Nothing awful could happen to her while she was intent upon them. The owl landed in front of her. The taste of acid, a classic precursor to a panic attack leaked beneath her tongue, and Lily acknowledged that trauma beat eggs every time.

No one else at the table noticed Lily’s nerves as she removed the letter with shaking hands, continuing with their blather, like nothing awful had ever touched a single one of their lives. One look at the letter alleviated her fears. The handwriting didn’t match Petunia’s at all, and now that she could think more clearly, Lily realized the owl was regal and well-groomed, a far cry from the public-service owls that Petunia rented. Lily still couldn’t relax, a spike of adrenaline still coursed through her system, but she wouldn’t burst into tears at the table, which was a godsend.

Curiously, Lily fingered the red envelope, flipping it over a few times in her hands, but there was no return address. Only her name in precise lettering. She opened the letter.

Lily then dropped it with a scream. Her scream did nothing to drown out the terrible, booming voice that emanated from the letter, loud enough to make her clap hands to her ears and moan. Overwhelmed by the volume, it took Lily a moment to pay any mind to what the voice was saying. The first word Lily heard distinctly was “mudblood.” The second was “whore.” From there, the shrieking letter continued in the same vein, insulting Lily in every way imaginable, though it always defaulted back to its favorite “mudblood whore” insult.

Looking about, Lily saw the rest of the Great Hall was quiet. Conversation couldn’t have survived in the wake of the ear-splitting shouts, but the attention of her classmates went beyond that. Some students were sympathetic, while others were shocked or gleeful, but all attention was equally unwelcome to Lily. She shrank in her seat, cupping a hand to the side of her face to hide her expression and tried to outwait the onslaught.

It lasted seven minutes.

Whoever had sent the howler must have sported iron lungs because they managed to barrage Lily with insults without pausing for breath, easily competing with the lung capacity of an Olympic swimmer. There was something truly deranged about the voice, too, and goosebumps crept up Lily’s legs with the realization that the sender intended her real harm.

Finally, the howler burst into orange flame, disintegrating. The pile of ash landed directly on the plate of eggs. The perfect quiet in the wake of the storm was unnatural. No one dared so much as whisper, like the awful voice might return and attack them. What finally broke the hush was laughter, pure and unadulterated, and it was coming from the Gryffindor table.

Unable to believe a member of her own house could find her predicament so funny – perhaps her hearing had been impaired by the shocking volume of her assailant –, Lily turned to the voice, only to find it ringing directly in her ear. It was Sirius, doubled over and tears falling from his eyes. It was worse than the silence. To break the spell of Sirius’s manic laughter, students began to eat again, filling the room with the sound of forks clattering off glass china and the drip of pumpkin juice from the jug.

Lily didn’t wait for Sirius to recover from his laughing fit before turning the full force of her glare upon him. She half-expected to hear that the awful howler had been a prank. If it was, Grindylows or not, she was going to dump him. Her heart was racing double-time at having that horrible slur flung at her repeatedly. She couldn’t afford to show her weakness, lest every bigot in the castle learn she could be rattled, but internally, she wanted to collapse into bed and not move for an hour. A century.

No one had ever spoken to her like that. Not to her face.
“What are you laughing at?” Lily demanded, cheeks brilliantly pink.

“I’m afraid you’ve just been introduced to dear old mum,” Sirius said, choking on his own cackles.

“Excuse me?”

“That was my mother. The estimable Walburga Black. Aren’t you happy to have made her acquaintance?” Sirius said.

No one else at the table could see the humor in it. They all avoided Lily’s eyes, engrossed by their books, their plates, their fingernails. The only person who appeared to understand her predicament was Marlene, who winced visibly through the scene. Now, she gave Lily a sad little shrug.

“Why did your mother send me a howler?” Lily asked.

“I imagine Regulus reported us, the little brat. Surprised it took him this long, actually,” Sirius said. “You know how my family holds with that blood purity bilk. She doesn’t approve.”

“I thought she’d disowned you. What does she care?” Lily said, which was perhaps insensitive to his familial woes, but she was rattled.

“True. Hypocrisy at its finest, isn’t it?” Sirius said. “I knew she’d be livid, but I wasn’t sure how she’d react. I half expected her to try to hush it up, play it off as a rumor. Guess not.”

He didn’t move to say anything else. No words of comfort. Nothing. Worse, Sirius’s laughter wasn’t derisive. It didn’t taste like blood in his mouth. He was truly delighted by the howler scene.

Lily didn’t lecture Sirius. She just wanted to put the event out of memory. Hogwarts was meant to be the last safe space in wizarding Britain, and she didn’t want to see it tainted.

With a concerted effort, their table returned to business as usual. Minutes later, they were all back to laughing, no one louder than Sirius, and talking about the upcoming Quidditch match. Lily remained silent, back a rod of steel to belie the way her neck prickled with anxiety.

A few minutes later, Annie Powell said, “There’s a sight I never thought I’d see.”

Everyone followed Annie’s less-than-subtle pointing to the end of the table. James and Emmeline had just sat down together. One of James’ arms slung loosely around Emmeline’s shoulders. Depending on how Lily squinted, the arm looked either friendly or romantic. She looked long and hard, relieved to have a new subject for her thoughts.

“The gossip was enough to draw Cheryl out of her book, and she chimed in, “I don’t know, Michaela. She looks pretty comfortable from where I’m sitting.”

“I can’t believe they’re getting back together,” Michaela said.

Lily didn’t so much as twitch, every muscle locked and steady. This news didn’t upset her at all.

Michaela’s declaration proved too much for Marlene, though, who dropped her silverware to the table with a discordant clang. “They are not getting back together!”

“You sure?” Cheryl said.

“After what he pulled? I’m positive. Emmeline’s not a slag like you and me. She has standards,”
Marlene said. (Cheryl reacted to being called a slag with far more grace than Lily imagined she could have summoned in the same situation, and just returned to her book.)

With the conversation moving along, Lily gave herself permission to look, to see the way Emmeline curled slightly into James’ strong, tan arm, the way James’ lips hadn’t stopped moving for a second. He felt like he could talk to her, was eager to share his thoughts, and Emmeline was happy to listen. They were both windswept and ruffled – him from Quidditch practice and she from a run around the grounds – and there was something bright, unbearable to look at, about their combined athleticism. Together, they were like the sun.

Still bickering about James and Emmeline’s dating prospects, Sirius said, “I wouldn’t be so sure, Marlene. Things are different this time.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure, Sirius. From where I’m sitting, things look exactly the same,” Marlene rebutted.

Sirius’s reaction was immediate, body going stiff. Everybody glanced away hurriedly except for Marlene and Sirius who glared one another down. Sirius looked like he could cast a perfect Avada Kedavra, powered solely by his anger, and Marlene returned his stare with the confidence of a girl who could deflect a killing curse. By the way everyone busied themselves with their food, it was obvious everyone understood the subtext of the exchange.

Everyone but Lily.

She was perfectly confused, not the least because she’d always thought warm, bubbly Marlene adored Sirius, and the cold woman shooting daggers with her eyes clearly despised him. What had James done to Emmeline? What did Sirius believe was different? Why was he so outraged that Marlene disagreed? It was like she’d fallen asleep and woken up on a soapy episode of Coronation Street.

It didn’t escape her attention that when Sirius wrapped an arm around her waist, he gripped a little tighter than usual.

Lily was late for her scheduled Tuesday tutoring session with Quincy. Of course, late was relative, when she considered that Quincy typically rolled up fifteen minutes after the scheduled start time. If she hurried, she could still beat him to their seats in the library. Assuming she had the energy in her sluggish body to move faster than an ailing flobberworm.

She wouldn’t have been running late, except she’d stopped in the dormitory after classes, thinking she’d just drop off her bags, and had instead passed out on Marlene’s bed. The wave of exhaustion had hit her with such force that she half believed she’d been drugged. There was no foul play about it, though. She’d been sleeping even less than normal. On top of her normal activities, she was now juggling hours a day with Sirius, dropping meals left and right to milk every second dry. She’d skipped dinner for two days straight and breakfast that morning as well. On top of everything else, the mess of hints that everyone had dropped about James – about his row with Sirius or his relationship with Emmeline – were keeping her up those few precious hours she was fortunate enough to spend in bed.

There was a limit to how long she could keep up this kind of pace. Already, she was noticing that when Will and Mei-Lin looked at her, their eyes lingered a beat too long. They were searching her for signs that she needed an intervention.
The specter of fourth-year hung over them like a dark cloud. Buried beneath the weight of all her commitments, her friendships, and school, Lily had suffered what some might call a breakdown. She’d attended classes with something wild lurking behind her eyes, earning the concern of every professor. She’d also started sleepwalking. It was terrible, a blight upon Gryffindor house, as she’d wander the common room and stairwells, babbling frantically, just a string of sounds that rarely formed a coherent word. She’d leave the Tower, too, sometimes waking up a on the sixth-floor or outside the Portrait of the Fat Lady, who was deeply disapproving of her escapades. It was too dangerous for her to be wandering the halls, defenseless. As James had so aptly put it, she had enemies. Plus, the physical toll had left her haggard and weak. Lily had only started to regain her bearings when she lessened her load, dropping assignments and revision, especially for the classes she disliked. Quickly, her mental state had improved, the sleepwalking had stopped, and she’d never since committed fully to her classes, calling them dangerous for her health.

She knew the prospect of a return to her fourth-year antics frightened her friends. Unlike them, Lily wasn’t afraid that her body might turn on her. She was properly furious. It felt like the truest adversary to achieving her goals was her own damned needy body. It went on strike against her whole sleep-is-for-the-weak philosophy.

Rather than take the Grand Staircase, Lily bypassed the busiest routes; there was a shortcut to the library if she cut across the third-floor. Rounding the corner, she saw three things: a row of Robot Lilliputs toys, all shiny and new, recently removed from their packaging; a pile of dungbombs, not yet activated; and James Potter, kneeling in the middle of it all, holding a fistful of string.

Lily acted on instinct. “You!”

“Me!” James cried back.

She’d managed to genuinely startle him, and his hands flew to his hair before he thought to try to conceal his suspicious activity. He rose to his feet, trying to block the pile of dungbombs with his shadow, as if she were that stupid. Lily didn’t much care about whatever infantile prank he was about to inflict upon the school. (And, it didn’t take a genius to figure that he was going to string the dungbombs to the toy robots, wind them up, and let them trail the dungbombs through the halls for maximum havoc.) Her thoughts were otherwise directed.

“I need to know something, and I need a clear answer from you,” Lily said.

“You alright? You look…tired,” James said. His eyes trailed her figure without a hint of lechery. Just pure concern.

“You told me that your row with Sirius has nothing to do with me,” Lily said, “But Sirius told me differently.”

James drew himself up to his full height. “What’s he been saying?”

The downside of not sleeping was that her body was functioning on pure adrenaline, and it didn’t engender the best choices. Lily hadn’t planned to confront James about Sirius’s cryptic comments. Her well-rested, rational brain had, in fact, determined that doing so would be a terrible idea, an idea which would lose her Sirius’s trust and cause a needless fight with James.

Her whole body was wired, the kind of buzz that usually came after drowning six cups of coffee in an hour, and her fingers tingled. Caution wasn’t an option.

“He told me,” Lily began hotly, “that he wasn’t angry with you about anything concerning me, but that you didn’t feel the same, which is not what you told me in the prefects’ bath!”
“I told you that our fight wasn’t about you, which is true,” James said.

“But Sirius said –”

“I understand what he said,” James said shortly. “We’re not fighting about you.”

“So, he was lying? You’re not upset about us dating?” Lily pressed.

Lily had asked the question a dozen different ways in a dozen different combinations, and she’d finally landed upon the right ones, like a password to unlock James’ truth, his feelings. And when he released them, it was one of those definitive moments that bisected her life. There was living before and there was living after, and Lily couldn’t ever return to the former.

“Not upset –” James barked, “Not upset – I could bloody murder him!”

As if for emphasis, James kicked the pile of dungbombs, setting them off with a cloud of noxious gas that soured the air. James didn’t even react because he was too busy staring at her, so intensely that she half-expected she might detonate in an explosion of her own.

Everything about the scene rubbed Lily the wrong way, not the least of which was the jealous demon in the back of her head that was hellbent on bringing the image of Emmeline and James to the forefront of her mind whenever she lost focus for so much as a second. Angry at him, angry at herself for feelings she had no right to in the first place, Lily said, “Murder him? Why? How do you get to be upset? You didn’t want me!”

“Don’t act stupid,” James said harshly.

Something strange and terrible was growing inside her. Her feet felt heavy, not swollen like with a pregnancy, but somehow separate from her body. He’d called her stupid, a word that had never been lobbed at her before, certainly not as a weapon. Certainly not by James. She ought to have screamed at him. All she managed was a half-gasped, “What?”

“Don’t play that with me,” James warned. “Don’t start with that ‘you didn’t want me’ nonsense. It’s shite.”

“Maybe I am stupid. Spell it out for me,” Lily demanded because she didn’t understand him, and she was sick of it. Too many secrets. Too many lies.

“What? What do you want me to say? You want me to say that I’ve been in love with you since we were twelve years old!”

His words rang in her ears and, after they faded, a nonexistent bell kept right on clanging, clogging up her senses. She chose that inopportune moment to start coughing, hacking really. What started as wheezes transformed into full-throated coughs that bent her body in two and brought tears streaming down her cheeks. She couldn’t control her coughing at all, couldn’t grasp a full breath that didn’t worsen the agitation of her lungs.

Through it all, James was forced to wait impatiently. He was probably panicking. He was probably wondering whether she hadn’t faked this perfectly timed coughing fit to evade him. By holding her breath entirely, Lily was able to quell the worst of the coughing and think about the bombshell James had just dropped on her life. Lily kept her silence far too long; she knew it as a full minute lapsed. The only sound was the occasional wheezing breath. Warring inside her were a million different impulses and explanations, each more implausible than the last. The entire conversation was wrought from the kind of fantasies she would entertain about James in class, and she ought to have had something clever to say, just like in her daydreams. She didn’t.
The only thing Lily knew was that the corridor wasn’t large enough to contain her and the immensity of her feelings. They were suffocating her sure as the noxious dungbomb fumes she was sucking through her mouth in deep, gasping breaths. Like a TV that couldn’t pick up a station, her vision grew staticky.

“You rejected me,” Lily croaked finally.

“Biggest fucking mistake of my life.”

Lily took one long look at him through her narrowed vision – the chin tilted with wounded pride, the plaintive lines of his mouth, and those eyes dripping with sincerity – and for once, she thought she understood every nuance of someone’s expression as if he were feeding her the crumbs of his heart. He’d said he loved her, and he wasn’t lying.

She coughed again. Again. There was no air in the corridor. Her knees bruised as they hit the floor. The blurry TV station drew even more out of focus.

She fainted.
Throughout the course of the month, I think of all sorts of things I want to say about the next chapter, and then forget them all by the time posting comes around. Thank you to anyone who had kind words for the last chapter! Thank you to Corina for beta’ing as always. For the past year, I’ve felt very disconnected from this story, afraid that I won’t be able to connect all the dots or finish it as I take on more real life responsibilities and pursue other goals. That said, I remember enjoying this chapter when I wrote it last December, and I enjoyed editing it this time around. It needed less work than most. I hope some of you can forgive (or even enjoy!) the melodrama as this chapter delivers another big moment toward the end. Maybe it’s just my style.

Happy August!

James Potter served two detentions for instigating the dungbomb incident that sent Lily Evans to the Hospital Wing with a concussion. The typical response to the detonation of a dungbomb was to run in the other direction, so it wasn’t common knowledge that exposure to the gas for more than a few moments could have unwanted side effects. Side effects such as: dizziness, nausea, blurred vision, and oh yeah, fainting. The warning labels on those packages were criminally tiny.

Add in the physical toll of exhaustion, and it was no wonder that Lily had lost consciousness. The heavy collision of head with stone caused the concussion and ensured what might have been a brief fainting spell stretched on longer. By the time she came to in the Hospital Wing, Madame Pomfrey had already cleared the concussion right up, so all Lily lost was a few hours of time. No pain. No stress.

Well, plenty of stress.

She had been told that James carried her to the Hospital Wing, but that had been their last contact since his…well…Almost a full week had passed, and James had deftly managed to avoid being within shouting distance of Lily, skiving off classes and mealtimes as needed to maintain his distance. Lily was starting to wonder whether he’d installed one of those new-fangled satellite trackers, the kind that the astronauts used to navigate space travel, on her person because his ability to predict where she’d be and vacate the premises was uncanny.

And Lily knew he was avoiding her because she was looking for him. Every time she entered a room, her eyes were drawn to compulsively sweep for that familiar messy hair. She’d swallow the thick disappointment each time when her search came up empty.

James loved her.

Lily had refused to think on this revelation, hadn’t dissected the scene for clues or considered the repercussions. She’d pushed the confession to the side in favor of her goals. Still, his words would surface in her mind whenever she lost focus for so much as a second, always looking for an opening.

James loved her.
Lily almost wrote Petunia for advice. No one had ever been in love with Lily before; but Petunia, she had experience. There’d been a local boy that fancied Petunia when they were young. Petunia had been ten to his – Bobby Richmond’s – nine, so Petunia hadn’t given the bloke the time of day.

Bobby was a boy, and Petunia was a woman now, or so she told Lily. Every time they’d pass by his house, Petunia’s back would go ramrod straight – a feat considering her already formidable posture – and she wouldn’t spare a glance toward his house. If Bobby called out a hello, Petunia only haughtily raised her chin.

Petunia hadn’t cared for her admirer, and yet she’d been laser-focused on him all the same. It was clear in the way she carried herself that she was desperate to know whether Bobby watched her pale, knobby knees brush against her skirts. When she and Lily were both in bed, Petunia would talk endlessly about Bobby’s “obsession” with her, concocting scenarios as to how she’d snub him if he dared to catch her eye at the market – the audacity! For a time, Petunia was convinced Bobby was stalking her, peeping out the curtains to spot him out in the act. Lily thought Petunia was too hopeful at the prospect. Because regardless of whether the feelings were returned, there was just something extraordinary about the possibility that someone might love you.

Lily woke that morning, nearly a week after the dungbomb incident, with the same sense of confusion and longing that had plagued her since James’ confession. Her roommates were still asleep, which was rare. Emmeline was the early riser. It must have been only a few hours – three at most – since Lily had fallen asleep around two, well before the sun would even consider rising.

Hyper-aware of the silence, Lily crept on sock-padded feet to the loo. There, she took longer than usual to stare at herself in the mirror. The face she saw there confused her. It was the face of a girl who was loved. Lily didn’t suffer from low self-esteem and had a strong sense of her value, yet she didn’t understand how someone might love her. Fancy her? Yes. Love was a different universe.

Emmeline knew what it was to be loved. Before James had decided he loved Lily, he must have loved her first.

It would be another hour before Emmeline rose from bed. Unlike the other girls, Emmeline wouldn’t head straight to the loo to relieve herself. Instead, she’d dress in her loose clothes, spread out in the apex of the circle the girls’ five beds created, and stretch. There wasn’t a direction Emmeline’s well-trained body wouldn’t bend. Mary would refuse to watch because she said it hurt too much just imagining her legs in the splits. After she finished, Emmeline would spend the following half hour meditating, oozing a serenity that Lily could never achieve.

Morning stretches were a ritual Lily and Emmeline shared, though both girls went about it differently. Lily always retreated to the bathroom, settling for a few hasty minutes of stretching upon the cold, unforgiving floor, just enough to wake herself up. It was soothing, the chance to numb her ever active brain. She liked the tangibility of the results. So often, her goals were indistinct and long-in-coming, so that she could work for ninety hours and see no difference from where she’d first started. Flexibility was something else entirely. She could feel the sear of her cavles as she touched nose to knee or fingers to toes, could track the increase in her flexibility by the pain she felt when she flattened her palms to the ground. Faced with the satisfying ache, she couldn’t think about much else – not the Grindylows, not James Potter, not Lily Evans.

Lily didn’t want to be herself that morning. She didn’t want to be a girl who was loved and utterly confused about her life in the wake of it. She wanted to be Emmeline, a girl who had been loved and had the surety to move through life in spite of it.

The air was chilly when Lily returned to her room, and she tightened her robe protectively. She didn’t allow herself a moment to think as she crawled beneath Emmeline’s bed. From there, she
unearthed the yoga mat and set up just as Emmeline did every day. The girls’ dormitory was circular, the five beds settled around the walls and creating an arc with only one pathway to the door. It was in the direct center of the beds that Emmeline always unrolled her mat. Breathing as deeply as her need for silence allowed, Lily sat on the mat and touched her toes. Immediately, she was bombarded with the noise – all the nighttime shufflings that she tuned out so easily in sleep were magnified as she sat there, feeling undignified, an imposter. To her left were Mei-Lin’s gasps for air, short and uneven, like she almost forgot to breathe in her sleep; Marlene muttered to herself in a language that her heart had written and no one else would ever speak; Mary emitted those oddly pained whines that had startled Lily when they first roomed together. Even Emmeline’s gentle breathing reverberated in Lily’s ears like an indictment.

She was sweating, having barely finished on stretch. Guilty for no discernable reason. She wasn’t Emmeline and never could be.

A sense of unease clung to her, and, later that morning, Lily went to a meeting of the newspaper group agitated. Since Lily had passed out before her typical session of tutoring with Quincy the week before, she’d been forced to double up on the two activities now. Seated in the library on Lily’s left were the members of the *Hogwarts Monthly Letter*, and to her right was Quincy Terlep, only half-pretending to work on his assignment.

“Can’t you ditch him?” Will stage-whispered, gesturing to Quincy Terlep.

“Honestly, he can’t afford it,” Lily said in a more genuine whisper. They both smiled unconvincingly when Quincy turned to see what they were whispering about.

The library table had never been more crammed. Quincy had a habit of scribbling bits of his assignment on different pieces of parchment throughout the day, so that he had nearly thirty pages, chewed and tea-stained, spread out around him, his current assignment to map them together like a puzzle. Lily had picked out seven reference books to assists in his translation, none of which he’d yet to open; the tomes were forbidding stuff, stacked high enough that Quincy couldn’t see the crown of Mei-Lin’s head from across the table. Dorcas had decorated her side of the table with precisely laid quills and ink in various colors – red for corrections to the copy, black for additions, blue for notes.

Dorcas had donned her reading glasses – an affect as Lily was almost certain that Dorcas wasn’t near-sighted and the copy hovered right before her nose – and was reviewing Mei-Lin’s article on the last Quidditch match. Trying to act as if she didn’t care her work was being harshly assessed, Mei-Lin stared at the ceiling. Will was eating pretzels.

“It’s not very exciting,” Dorcas commented.

“It was an eight-minute match,” Mei-Lin protested. “It wasn’t very exciting.”

Dorcas adopted a McGonagallish expression, peering over her specs, “Your job is to make it exciting. Maybe start the article with some statistics on the average length of games, how rare an eight-minute match is, that kind of thing. Put in the worldwide record for the shortest match and maybe the Hogwarts record as well. Make people feel as if it’s historic.”

“Research,” Mei-Lin said glumly.

“You do this every time,” Dorcas huffed. “If you didn’t bin your notes after every article, you wouldn’t have to go back and redo the research. I know you’ve covered this subject before.”

Lily frowned over Quincy’s work rather than listen to the bickering. He was trying to translate the Shanidar spells, found carved into cave walls in modern-day Iraq and essential for dating wizardry
back more than six thousand years, into Latin. He’d sketched one rune out to form Mingō Navisum,’ which if it held with its Latin roots would be a spell that induced pissing on a boat. Or perhaps in a boat. Or by the boat itself? There was really no way to tell until it was cast as Quincy had stumbled upon an entirely new invention with that one.

Preferring not to just give Quincy the answers – because how would he ever learn? – Lily struggled to find a way to correct him. The laugh caught in her throat wasn’t helping.

“Um…you definitely want to reconsider the first part, alright?” Lily said.

To Mei-Lin, Will said, “I think I found a mistake – you called Nott a ‘Slytherin chaser.’ You’d better change it to a ‘Slytherin wanker.’”

Immediately, Dorcas wrestled the article out of Will’s hands before he could sketch in his edits. She took her proofing duties very seriously.

“That’s the kind of joke James would make,” Lily said to Will.

“Coming from you, a Potter comparison’s a compliment,” Will said.

Lily scowled and opened her mouth to protest, but Quincy tapped at her shoulder, so she spun around to address his question. For twenty minutes they continued on in this haphazard manner, Lily trying to juggle two very different responsibilities. When Dorcas finished lambasting Will and Mei-Lin for their respective failures, it was finally time to turn to Lily, so she tried to concentrate as much of her attention on their editor as possible – a 70-30 split.

“Lily, I’m going to want you to take the first pass on all of the proofing for the June issue,” Dorcas said.

“But you’re so much better at it,” Lily wheedled.

“I have nine articles to research and write this month. Since you haven’t submitted a single article to me in months, you can help by taking the editing off my plate. Thank you,” Dorcas said.

There wasn’t much room to argue after Dorcas Meadows thanked you preemptively.

“And we have the OWL and NEWT exams coming up next month. You can cover those. I’d like an article this month chronicling how students are revising for their exams and some tips on destressing. Then, in June, an article on the exams themselves,” Dorcas ordered Lily.

Lily nearly gasped. “Dorcas, I can’t! I have to work on the –” Lily cast a less than unobtrusive glance at Quincy – “article on killer whales. I don’t have time to research anything else.”

“You promised you’d let me assign you to anything if you didn’t turn up anything useful by the end of the year. Now, I’ve been reading your progress reports each week, and you don’t even have the beginnings of an article,” Dorcas said.

“I made plenty of progress! I have a number of leads, and I think I can name at least two…killer whales,” Lily protested.

Nearby, Lily heard students laughing, and she glanced around to make sure it wasn’t directed at them. A few tables away, Emmeline was sitting with a mixed group of students, from every house and year. They didn’t appear to be studying but were rather having a brilliant time, giggling over something Emmeline had said. Lily noticed that everyone at the table was unconsciously angling towards Emmeline, like she was the sun and they were sucked into her orbit. They were too far away
to overhear Lily’s conversation, so she returned her attention to Dorcas.

“The only article you’d be ready to write is on that party you went to, a wrap-up for the students who weren’t invited. Are you willing to do that?” Dorcas challenged.

Lily refused to see her name in the byline of a Grindylows article until she was finished with the real thing. To submit some pithy article on parties now would be to alert the Grindylows that she was onto them.

“No, I don’t want to write about the killer whales yet. I’ll take the OWLs stories,” Lily capitulated. She looked over at Quincy, who was frowning dumbly at his assignment. If he were anyone else, their poorly veiled deception would have fallen flat. As Quincy was still translating the rune out to mean urination, however, Lily thought their secrets were safe.

Lily didn’t pay her pupil the attention he was due, so she didn’t catch when he decided to brandish his wand and cast his disgustingly mistranslated spell. She heard him cast ‘Mingō Crus,’ – to urinate on a leg – and shrieked. His dangerous wand was pointed straight at her.

Instead of disaster, the beam of soft blue light merely lifted the hair on her head for a few seconds and then released it to cascade down her back. Lily almost cried with relief. She hadn’t wanted to know how the spell, properly cast, would have manifested.

Quincy gave a little cheer, “See, I’m improving, Lily.”

Lily couldn’t tell that beautiful, proud boy his error, so she simply translated the rune herself. She was not risking any more mixups.

Unbothered, Quincy continued, “I swear, this new wand is the best thing that’s ever happened to me. It’s like it can read my mind. My last one was powerful, like the magic would just shoot out of it, but the spell would always go wonky.”

Lily hummed, uninterested. It seemed to her that it wasn’t the wand that caused his grades to suffer. Then, her head shot up.

“Did you say you have a new wand?”

“Yeah, isn’t she beautiful?” Quincy said, proudly showing her his wand.

“When did you get it?” Lily demanded.

“Not quite two months ago, I think.”

Urgently, Lily said, “Here’s a Latin dictionary. Look up Mingō. I have to find a book, and I need Mei-Lin, Will, and Dorcas to help me. It’s a very…uh, it’s a big book. Very heavy.”

Stomping on toes and ignoring her friends’ whines, Lily pushed and prodded her mates into the stacks, giving no explanation beyond her manic eyes. Once they were clear across the library, Lily scanned their surroundings for eavesdroppers. She dropped to her knees to peer between the gap in an encyclopedia set. There was no one crouching on the other side. Above her, the other members of the newspaper exchanged worried glances.

“Quincy has a new wand. Sirius has a new wand. And remember, Quan Ngo got a new wand last year,” Lily said. “Wizards almost never get new wands! What are the odds that all three of them needed theirs replaced over the course of a about a year?”
“You think –” Mei-Lin began.

“It’s too big a coincidence not to mean something. I think it’s part of their induction into the society. They receive new wands, almost like a new identity or maybe like a membership card. I’m not sure,” Lily said.

“Sacrificing your own wand for something,” Will murmured, toying intently with his own hawthorn wand, “You’d have to wand the thing bad. I mean, it would be like giving up a part of yourself. A perfect way to weed out anyone who wasn’t completely committed.”

“But Terlep’s so thick,” Mei-Lin said.

“The more I learn about the Grindylows, the more I’m convinced they’re just a bunch of shallow, spoilt children. They’d enlist Quincy,” Lily said.

She only felt marginally guilty for lumping James and Sirius amongst the number of shallow, spoilt children.

One of whom was in love with her. In case she could ever forget.

“Wand oaths!” Mei-Lin exploded unexpectedly. “It’s more than just a sacrifice. I bet they all take an oath on their new wands! You speculated before about an Unbreakable Vow, but that’s serious business. Too serious. Every Unbreakable Vow has to be registered with the Ministry. But a wand oath’s different.”

Wand oaths were a matter of the wand’s honor. If a wand’s wizard or witch broke this most solemn of vows, the wand would be honor-bound to reject the wizard forever, becoming naught but a length of timber in the unworthy’s hand. The years of connection forged between wand and wizard were too intense for someone to just throw away on a whim, and wand oaths were upheld almost religiously by the wizarding community. Yet, as Mei-Lin said, the consequences were not fatal, so there was still room to reneg if conscience dictated. Wand oaths were also more flexible because the wand would sometimes interpret events and determine the agreement was no longer viable, forgiving their wizard for recanting – for example, if a wizard swore to always protect their friend, but said friend then tried to murder them, the wand would recognize the betrayal as terminating the oath and allow its wizard the right of self-defense.

Bound up by honor and magic, no Grindylow would betray their secrets for trifles like money or celebrity. It would explain their loyal silence over the centuries.

“Well, it’s all something, I suppose, but what can you do with this information beyond putting it in the final article?” Will asked. “It’s not like we can start surveying everyone at school about their wands. That would be like taking an ad out in The Daily Prophet, saying ‘we’re investigating the Grindylows.’”

Dorcas ruminated quietly on the issue, and when she landed upon the solution, her voice came out in a whisper, like Lily’s enthusiasm and paranoia had infected her. “The Ministry! All abandoned wands are supposed to be submitted and registered with the Ministry. They don’t want something that powerful just laying around or for people to cast dark magic with another wizard’s wand and cause all sorts of problems. That should be public information, too.”

“That’s genius! So, we’ll just write the Ministry, soliciting information on wands discarded in the last month and cross-reference from there,” Lily said, beaming.

“This is good reporting, Lily. A good lead,” Dorcas complimented.
Hopeful, Lily tried, “Does that mean I don’t have to write the OWLs article anymore?”

“Not on your life.”

Well, she’d tried.

The Astrological Society was one of Lily’s least reputable activities. She’d joined in third-year, drawn by the promise of interweaving Astronomy and Divination, two subjects that fascinated her endlessly. For the first two years of her membership, the society had delivered on its promise. The small group would examine charts, plot out the stars in the sky, and examine historical events to determine how the heavens had influenced history unfolded. The less scientific-minded members had pressed Lily into the most poignant philosophical conversations of her life, as they debated whether the stars influenced events or merely reflected them: had a different planet been in power on Guy Fawkes day, would things have transpired differently, or were they always destined to occur as they had? Pre-determination versus free will. Lily always argued that the movement of the stars and planets was predictable, meaning actors throughout history could have changed their lot had they only chosen a different moment to act. Listening to the others’ arguments, however, Lily would experience doubt, wondering if whether her role in the world was less fixed and tossing about in bed at night as she struggled to come to terms with this existential threat to her existence. The club had challenged her to be more than simply a machine that regurgitated facts. It had made her think.

Then, the president of the club had finished her seventh-year, and a new president was named: Marlene McKinnon.

The Society had changed in predictable ways.

Typically, they met in the Astronomy Tower, but Marlene had moved the meeting to the Divination classroom, through the trap door in the North Tower, because it was raining outside. Marlene insisted that seeing the rain pelt the magically enforced lancet windows, just wide enough to push through a telescope, made her feel cold.

Entirely made up of girls, the eight members of the Astrological Society sat on bean bags and stools, sunk low to the ground. Gina Parrish had brewed tea for the meeting in identical tea cups made of fine-bone china, each decorated with petal pink flowers, too symmetrical to occur in nature. They were short one cup, so Lily had agreed to sip her tea from a brown coffee mug. It had a wide brim, and she accidentally tipped it too far, burning her upper lip.

They were short a cup because, inexplicably, Mary had decided to attend the meeting. Lily had never seen Mary at a single school even – outside the occasional Quidditch match. Marlene was positively glowing with pride that the club she organized had caught Mary’s notoriously limited attention. Absently, Mary twirled her already drained tea cup around by the handle, daring it to fall and shatter.

Lily had run into Mary briefly earlier that morning. The other girl had been deep in a conversation with Lily’s very own boyfriend. Falling short, Lily had stared at them, the way they blended together, all dark hair and poise. When Sirius spoke, Mary actively listened, made eye contact, everything. And in return, Sirius seemed relaxed, like he needn’t keep up his hundred conflicting personas and could just be himself in Mary’s presence.

Spotting her, Sirius had broken away from Mary to greet her. Most days, Sirius greeted her with a kiss – to the hair, the temple, the lips – but with Mary watching, he didn’t so much as touch her. Plans for a date the next day had been made, though Lily was baffled by Sirius’s instructions to pace seventh-floor corridor across from the tapestry of Barnabus the Barmy. And all under the apathetic
stare of Mary MacDonald.

Lily didn’t blame Mary for seeming bored at the Astrological Society meeting. Instead of focusing on the stars or examining current events, Marlene started the meeting as she always did: sign compatibility discussions. The shift under Marlene’s reign had been towards gossip, and all the members, excepting Lily, were thrilled to spend an hour a week, predicting who would make a charming couple or who was going to bomb their finals because their sun sign would be in Mars on test day.

The girls debated the compatibility of an Aries with a Leo, perking Lily’s interest for perhaps the first time in the history of these discussions. James was an Aries.

When there was an opening the conversation, Lily hesitantly interjected, “Which signs would be most compatible with an Aries? They seem a bit difficult.”

“Hmm, a Gemini, a Sagittarius,” Marlene answered thoughtfully.

It was a mistake. Lily knew better than to broach this topic while James was dutifully ignoring her. Better for her sanity would be to return the favor by dismissing all thoughts of him from her mind. Learning the stars also supported them as a couple, the introduction of fate and magic to the occasion, would only set her up for misery. But James was in love with her, so she had to know.

“What about an Aquarius?” Lily asked.

“Oh sure! They’re highly compatible,” Marlene said.

“Are you sure?” Gina Parrish questioned. “Both those signs like to be in control. I think that would be a pretty tense, back-and-forth relationship.”

“True, but that’s not insurmountable,” Marlene said dismissively. “Think about it. An Aquarius is this zany, out-of-the-box person, always coming up with adventures and ideas. That’s highly attractive to an Aries. Then, the Aries is an executor. They’ve got the passion and creativity to follow through with those ideas. They’re both energetic, lively. They’d have so much fun together.”

“What about sex?” Mary asked, a hint of deviance powering her smirk.

“Oh! Phenomenal sexual chemistry,” Marlene said.

“Agreed. The need for control might be an issue out of the bedroom, but I think it’d prove pretty explosive during sex,” Gina Parrish said, giggling through the word sex, like she couldn’t believe her own audacity.

There had to be a spell to suppress a blush, to revert the flow of blood to somewhere less noticeable, like the phalanges. No one would notice if her fingers turned mottled red. Lily needed to learn it immediately, mind racing with the implications of her compatibility with James. Every descriptor was spot on. She’d always adored James’ passion, whether to a prank or his studies. She might not always agree with his decisions, but the dedication he showed to all of them had always attracted her. Their every conversation was a thinly veiled battle for control, just like Gina said, but Lily had never considered how that might play out in sex, and her libido charged ahead with the idea. She wanted to find a private place and consider the implications of this information thoroughly…and luxuriously. Wow.

James was so handsome when he was smiling and at ease, but the way his jaw would clench when she challenged him, the onset of stubbornness was sinful. Would it be too obvious if she fanned herself? Everyone else was bundled up in their robes to wade off the cold.
“You’re an Aquarius, right, Lily?” Marlene said.

“Um, yes, on the cusp between Aquarius and Pisces.”

“I’d think you’d ask about Scorpios then,” Mary said blandly. “Since that’s Sirius’s sign.”

Lily took a hearty gulp of her tea. It was tepid now and washed weakly down her throat. No one else had made the connection that Sirius was a Scorpio, just Mary. Worse, Lily suspected Mary knew James was an Aries as well. Sometimes, Lily thought nothing could escape Mary MacDonald’s dark, impassive eyes.

“That’s right. Scorpio’s not an easy sign to deal with,” Marlene said, fidgeting in her seat. “I can, um, give you the breakdown if you like, Lily, but well, it’s not – uh – it’s not a great match on paper. I’d understand if you prefer not to know.”

Lily shrugged. “I never prefer ignorance to knowledge.”

“Well, the good news is that both are pretty loyal signs, and they have a pretty similar view when it comes to the importance of love,” Gina said optimistically.

“But it’s also like…doomed,” Marlene said, not hedging a bit. She leaned forward, closer to Lily, like she was scanning for signs that Lily might sob at this ominous declaration.

“Huh…” Lily couldn’t summon the proper response. She could barely force herself to ask, “Why?”

“Scorpios tend to stick to the places, emotionally and physically, where they feel safest. They, uh, brood. Meanwhile, an Aquarius likes to explore the world, discover new things and really goes out of their comfort zones. The two signs just never align in what they want to do,” Gina explained.

“That doesn’t sound much like Sirius,” Lily said, thinking about Sirius’s penchant for idiotic pranks and adventures with his mates. She said as much.

“Sure, it does,” Mary interjected. “Sirius’s comfort zone is with his dormmates. So as long as he’s with his boys, he can go anywhere. Try separating him from them and introducing an adventure. He’ll never go for it.”

The group tittered, mouths hidden behind raised teacups. Lily had the impression she’d just inadvertently waded into a battle with Mary MacDonald. Everyone was speculating as to which girl understood Sirius better and thought Mary had thrown down the gauntlet.

“Is that it?” Lily asked Gina.

Gina gave a sympathetic frown, “Honestly, no. Scorpios brood, and Aquariuses tend to think they’re just being overdramatic, which causes problems all around. Also, both can be majorly jealous. Scorpios especially.”

“Oh, well that sounds accurate. I’m wildly possessive of him,” Lily said.

No one laughed, and Lily realized they didn’t recognize the joke.

Marlene busied herself with the pot of tea, filling Lily’s once more to the brim and combing out a doily so she wouldn’t stain the table. “Don’t worry too much, Lily. These things are generalities, guidelines. There’s always exceptions.”

Nodding, Lily plastered on the sincerest smile she could manage, hoping people wouldn’t realize...
how disinterested she was in her compatibility with her own boyfriend. Other girls in the circle had crushes, so the conversation drifted to their potential matches. Covertly, Lily made a grab for the chart on Scorpios. She scanned the list, alighting on Scorpio’s compatibility with a Taurus; Mary was born in early May.

The chart said the two would make an excellent, balanced match, both fiercely loyal to the other. When Lily looked, Mary was examining her nails with no more interest than she ever showed. But somehow, Lily was certain she had Mary MacDonald’s undivided attention.

It was possible that Sirius Black had finally cracked.

At least, that’s what Lily ranted to herself as she paced the seventh-floor corridor as instructed the night of their date. Sirius had given further instructions that she was to imagine her perfect date location as she marched up and down the drafty hall. Lily had told Sirius in no uncertain terms, that he would never take her on the perfect date (read: the library of Alexandria pre-unfortunate-combustion), but he had stuck to his orders, leaving Lily to waste away in the corridor. The bald head of Barnabus the Barmy was shiny, winking at her mockingly.

Running late, Lily had fully expected Sirius to be waiting for her. When he wasn’t, she assumed he’d ditched for the night. Lily checked her wristwatch, an air-light bronze piece with a black face and gold numbering.

Giving a wristwatch on a witch’s seventeenth birthday was tradition. For years, she’d watched as the older students returned from their holidays sporting ornate pieces. The wealthier students’ watches were always custom-designed to reflect some part of their personality: Lila Selwyn’s watch would give real-time updates on local weather conditions, so she could best decide when the schedule the Ravenclaw house team practices. Emmeline’s reminded her when to eat, to stretch, to walk, to sleep for maximum health. As a girl, Lily longed for one of her own, a desire born half out of practicality – it would be useful to have a watch that alerted her to upcoming solar activity – and half out of a shameful wish to assimilate. She, at twelve-years old, wanted to be just like the other students for once.

By seventeen, Lily had largely rejected pureblood traditions, but the pockets of childhood remaining still wanted a watch for her birthday. That year, her father had sent her back from Christmas hols’ with her birthday present, a small box that she promised not to open until her birthday, and Lily had thought her father had remembered the thousands of hints she’d dropped about the custom.

It turned out to be ribboned stationary.

Generously, Will and Mei-Lin saved up to give her a wristwatch. It was leagues away from the complex watches most purebloods sported, but it had the nifty habit of warning Lily when she was running late. It would vibrate against her wrist, reminding her that she had to run, a warning that she nearly always ignored because she was usually hopelessly behind schedule by lunch.

Looking at her watch was bittersweet. It was a reminder that she was loved by her friends, that she’d far prefer to be chatting with them than waiting around for Sirius, who was probably never coming. Irritated, Lily paced up and down the corridor, per Sirius’s instructions, but rather than think of the perfect date spot, she imagined a place where she and her friends could meet without the difficulties of Will’s house status getting in the way. Sneaking him on a weekend when half the house was outside was one thing, but he rarely got both feet through the portrait hole on a weekday without one student or another throwing a hissy fit and kicking him out.
A minute into her pacing, Lily stumbled back, hand splayed against her chest because a door had sprung into existence, where before had been unobtrusive stone. Quickly, she cycled through the possible explanations – she was still faint from the dungbomb incident, lack of sleep was making her hallucinate, the door had always been there and she was merely unobservant and ought to give up investigative journalism then and there – before deciding to do the obvious: open it.

Inside, the room was everything she’d just imagined. By the fire, there were four seats, intimately pressed together and each with their own side-table to house drinks. Far opposite the fire, was an icebox to keep the pumpkin juice closed, stacked with magazines like a makeshift table. Away from the seating area was a stretch of empty, carpeted space, perfect for if Lily and her friends decided they wanted to dance around like lunatics for half an hour. Behind that was an actual, God’s honest, indoor tennis court, complete with balls and rackets.

The space was so impressive that Lily momentarily forgot all else. As thought returned and the possibilities of such a room occurred to her, Lily gave into giddiness and cackled.

The return of rational thought allowed for additional observations. Namely, Lily realized she wasn’t alone in the room. In the corner, shrouded in shadow, a figure sat hunched over, arms wrapped tightly around his knees. It – he – was shaking.

Lily searched behind her for an explanation. There was none. The figure gave a whimper, and it was enough to push Lily past shock and into urgent action.

It was Sirius, and he was crying.

“What happened?” she said, racing to his side.

Lily dropped to her knees, crawling the remaining distance until she could clutch at the fabric atop his shoulders. Rather than acknowledge her, Sirius turned his face away, resting his forehead against the wall. He’d quieted when Lily approached but that didn’t fool her. Through his tightly compressed lips, Lily could still hear the whimpers.

“Sirius, please talk to me. Tell me what happened to you,” Lily pleaded.

When he still didn’t answer, Lily set to work, rubbing her hands up and down his chest, checking him all over for injuries. Other than a fasciculation in his left wrist, the muscle jumpy and twitching, she couldn’t find any physical ailments. Lily didn’t know whether she was more relieved to find him clean of blood or horrified because it opened a door to a less solvable dilemma.

Sirius was murmuring something, lips barely parted and moving. The words lost to the wall. Lily laid her hands over his ears. His hair was wet from sweat, and she could see droplets clinging to his pale forehead. Desperate, Lily jerked his head toward her. Immediately, she wished she hadn’t. Concentrated pain was writ large on his face. It levelled her.

“I don’t know…I just want to help you. If you won’t tell me what happened, at least tell me how to help,” Lily croaked through a dry throat.

Her plea worked some kind of magic because a park of recognition flashed across Sirius’s face, quivering his lips. He knew her. Sirius pitched forward into her arms, burying his wet face in her chest. The collision knocked her back down a few degrees before she regained her balance.

He was shaking, and Lily felt the room go cold. It was impossible to remember the warmth and wonder she’d felt when entering the room only minutes before. This odd room, with its fire and its bright lights, was too hot, and Lily felt smothered by Sirius clinging to her.
Muffled to the point that Lily questioned whether she understood the words at all, Sirius muttered, “Dead…fault…shouldn’t have…blood and…too much.”

“Did you have a nightmare?” Lily asked hopefully.

It was the wrong question to ask because Sirius started to cry in earnest. This was anguish in its purest form. Whenever he could suck in enough air to push out a coherent word, he would wail “dead” and then proceed to hyperventilate into her neck, reverting to the helplessness of a child.

His father.

Sirius’s relationship with his father was doubtlessly negative, though she didn’t know any details. After over a month together, she and Sirius had barely scratched the surface of getting to know one another, and she couldn’t offer him the support he needed. Years of letter writing had made Lily an expert at comforting the bereaved in all but one circumstance. She’d never known how to react to the letters where her penpals spilled over with their resentment towards the dead, the ones where they confessed to always hating their deceased parent. For Lily, death had transformed her mother into something shinier than ever, an angel within the confines of memory.

Lily was at a loss as to what to say, afraid to insensitively blunder into one of his vulnerabilities, like a drunk driver with the keys to a lorry. What she needed was an expert on Sirius Black.

“I’m going to find James,” Lily said.

Like a toddler who’d been lost in a mall for an hour and was just now reunited with his mummy, Sirius clutched her tighter, shaking his head and continuing to murmur nonsense words into her chest.

“Sirius, I have to get James. He’ll know what to do,” Lily said.

“No, don’t! You, you’re all I have. Not James,” Sirius moaned.

Her stomach flipped and something wet and hot tore its way up her throat into her mouth, mingling with her saliva and turning it bitter. It was fast becoming necessary that she leave not only for Sirius’s sake but her own. She was suffocating under his neediness and her subsequent failures to help him. Only with great effort was she able to untangle herself from Sirius’s clinging arms, promising all the while that she would race back as quickly as she could. Misery had sapped him of strength, so his arms hung limp after she escaped them, head bobbing like bait in the water.

True to her promise, Lily ran from the mysterious room at full tilt. Gryffindor Tower was less than a three-minute walk from the seventh-floor corridor, and at a full run, it too Lily two. Several meters from the Portrait of the Fat Lady, Lily shouted the password, earning a screech of surprise from the portrait, which hurriedly swung aside to compensate for Lily’s dramatic dive.

Everything was too bright. Inside the bustling common room, people went about their lives with no idea of the crisis taking place just minutes away. She didn’t see James anywhere, but it was difficult to sort through all the familiar faces. Out of the corner of her eye, Lily saw Mei-Lin approaching, probably to ask why she was back so soon, but Lily didn’t want to field her questions. She tore up the boys’ staircase, ignoring the shouts of confusion from a few second-year boys, who had to flatten against the wall to avoid being knocked down.

She didn’t waste time knocking at the dormitory, flinging open the door with no regard for what may be on the other side. Duane Hinkley was in the process of pulling off his socks – fully dressed otherwise – and, seeing her, his hands shot up to cover his chest as if he were thoroughly exposed.
He and Khaled, busy at push ups in the corner, were the only boys in the dormitory.

“Do you –” Lily had to stop to wheeze “– know where James Potter is?”

“Pretty sure he’s at practice, isn’t he?” Duane said, looking to Khaled for confirmation.

Ah yes, Lily would have known if she’d stopped to think. The Quidditch Cup Final was only a week out, and James had declared the Pitch his new bedroom until Hufflepuff was defeated. It was also on the opposite bloody end of the grounds. Frustrated, Lily pulled at her own hair.

“Why do you ask, Eva–?”

Khaled didn’t get to finish his sentence because Lily was off again. She pushed her body to its ultimate limit as she ran, gulping in breaths that burnt, her throat adust from exertion. The whimsy of the castle’s design – moving staircases, trick steps, and winding passages – was now nefarious. The castle was a labyrinth keeping her from her destination, and when the Great Staircase moved out from under her, necessitating that she find another route, she nearly screamed.

When Lily finally arrived on the Pitch, the team was thankfully grounded, running laps. Lily doubted they could have been any more exhausted than she, though James’ militant barking for them to run faster seemed almost as intense. Unable to slow down with momentum and desperation pushing her footsteps, Lily barreled straight into James, knocking them both to the ground in a pile of bruises and aches.

“Bloody fucking–! Lily, why the hell?” James groaned from beneath her.

Still lying on top of him – she’d really earned a breather – Lily gasped out, “Sirius is in trouble. I don’t know what’s wrong, but he’s just crying and shaking, and I don’t know what to do. Please tell me you know how to help.”

James rolled to the side, toppling Lily into the grass. He sprang to his feet with more energy than Lily could bear to look at in her exhausted state, let alone summon for herself.

“Aren’t you coming?” James demanded, already half jogging away.

“I think I just need to lie here for a second. You go ahead. I’ll catch up,” Lily panted, staring up at the dark sky with unseeing eyes.

A hand interrupted her vision. “Buck up, Evans. You’re coming with me.”

James bounced on the balls of his feet, and this urgency rejuvenated Lily. She took his hand and let him whisk her off the Pitch. As they ran, James drowned her in question after question about what she’d seen, what Sirius had said, and what she suspected caused his behavior. It was hard to focus on anything but keeping pace with James’ unforgiving sprint, but Lily noticed that James wasn’t overly surprised that Sirius had suffered a breakdown. Only concerned.

The door to the mysterious room had disappeared, but James didn’t slow. He knew all about the disappearing room and paced up and down the corridor manically until it reappeared, as if on a timer. Unlike the door, Sirius was still in the corner where Lily had left him. James crouched by Sirius’s side. Their heads close, black hair blending together; they looked like brothers.

Her eyes stung, and Lily realized she hadn’t blinked once, afraid to miss a moment.

“Lily, wait outside,” James ordered.
“I want to help,” Lily argued, taking a bold step toward the two boys.

James took a deep breath. “You did good, Lily. You’ve already helped. Now, you can continue to help by letting us talk alone. Sirius and I need you to wait outside.”

Somehow, James had summoned the exact balance of manipulation and kindness to send her out into the corridor. Now it was time for the long, interminable wait.

She couldn’t bear to sit and do nothing, but no useful activity suggested itself. Settling reluctantly on the floor, Lily decided to write everything she knew about Sirius Black and his family down on paper. The list was far from comprehensive.

Lily knew the Blacks were purebloods, proud and rich to complete the stereotype. She also knew that Sirius had never had a kind word to say about his family, and he would loudly criticize Regulus for his failings as they passed in the halls, gone the stilted civility of that night at the Astronomy Tower. Lily knew that his mother possessed the lungs of an Olympic swimmer, the hysteria of a mass-murderer, and the bigotry of a Death Eater. Over the summer, Sirius had been disowned by his family. And, only six months later, Sirius’s father had died unexpectedly.

Maybe Sirius blamed himself for his father’s death. The shock of losing his oldest son might have killed him. Or maybe he died of other causes, but Sirius believed he could have prevented it by staying.

The very possibility crushed her. Lily had never once held herself responsible for her mum’s death, but she imagined the weight would be soul-shattering. Everything she’d witnessed over the past month – Sirius’s mood swings, the way he was quick to anger, and how he experimented with personalities like he hated his true self – darkened.

Since Lily knew little about the Blacks, writing a list only kept her busy for a quarter of an hour. To pass the time afterwards, Lily did the unthinkable: she practiced her Transfiguration. In her pockets, Lily always carried her wand, a tub of mints, dental floss, her notebook, and a spare quill and ink. Today, she also had a few crumpled toffee wrappers, one with an amateur doodle of a pygmy puff, drawn by Mei-Lin during Potions. Lily cast on one of the wrappers, trying to partially transform it into a pumpkin.

No matter how she struggled, she couldn’t quite manage it. After each attempt, Lily was left with either an entire pumpkin or a candy wrapper. Her mind rejected the partial transfiguration, rejected the idea that something could be two things at once. Her brain wanted to classify everything into neat categories, never acknowledging the duality that lay at the center of the universe.

Take her boyfriend, crying helplessly on the other side of the door. The unabashed vulnerability wasn’t the sign of a man, yet Sirius couldn’t be comfortably called a boy either. He was neither saint nor sinner. Sirius was capable of probing insight and blatant insensitivity within the span of five minutes.

Lily wondered if she was too quick to define people by how they were deficient or by the qualities she perceived, never affording them the same rich interior life that she herself possessed. Sirius was capable of cruelty, so therefore he could not be categorized as kind-hearted, but he was capable of charity and therefore could not be categorized as heartless. Perhaps it was more accurate to say, “Sirius is capable of cruelty, so therefore he is capable of cruelty. Sirius is capable of charity, so therefore he is capable of charity.”

Without thinking and eyes closed, Lily cast again. She opened her eyes to a perfect transfiguration.
The door creaked open while Lily was distracted, turning the pumpkin-cum-wrapper about to study it. James plucked the half-pumpkin from her hands. He looked exhausted.

Lily scrambled to her feet. It felt stupid to voice the words, unnecessary, but James didn’t leap to assuage her curiosity, so Lily said, “How’s Sirius?”

“I put him to bed. He’ll sleep here tonight,” James said.

“I don’t think he should be left alone,” Lily said.

“I’ll stay with him,” James assured her.

James’ eyes were hollowed out, shadows of his usual vigor. Like Sirius, James needed the chance to sleep and put this awful evening and the nightmares to rest, if only for a few hours. The armchairs inside looked comfortable enough, but Lily doubted they’d afford a sufficient night’s rest. She could never sleep well away from her own bed; the few sleepovers she’d ever attended had been bittersweet affairs, where Lily stared wide-eyed at the ceiling, long after her friends had drifted into sleep, hoping for a miracle, that Petunia might rescue her in a stolen car, or that her father would telephone for her to return home immediately.

“I can run back to the Tower and get you some blankets, a few pillows. I want you to be comfortable,” Lily said.

“No need. That’s the beauty of the Room of Requirement,” James said.

“The what?”

Against the odds, James smiled. Maybe it wasn’t his normal dazzling grin, the one that could add an extra year of life to a dying woman, instead a bit dulled around the edges, but it was a smile all the same.

“The Room of Requirement. You walk past this stretch of wall three times, picture clearly what you want the room to look like, and voila! A door appears, leading exactly to where you pictured. Right useful. I’ll just imagine up some beds, and we’ll be fine for the night.”

“That’s incredible,” Lily breathed.

“Isn’t it? I’d still be a virgin if it weren’t for this room. Remus and Peter found it our second year. They were going through this Rogers and Hammerstein phase, a real nightmare. I’d told them they needed to find a private place to screech, where innocents’ ears wouldn’t be harmed. That or I’d hex their vocal chords to tie together. Looking for a place to sing, they found this,” James said.

God, she loved this bloody miraculous school. One moment, she’d feel like fate was maliciously draining the blood from her heart with a bendy straw, and the next, she’d be fully recovered. Hogwarts never let her mope for long.

“Thank you for coming with me,” Lily told James, trying to convey the full force of her sincerity through her eyes. “I’ve never seen... actually, I haven’t seen someone that rent apart in a long time. I don’t know how I would have helped him if you hadn’t come with me. I was in so far over my head.”

“I should thank you for fetching me,” James corrected. “He’ll be alright. I’ll set him to sorts if it kills me, but I hat to imagine what would have happened if he’d been left alone.”

“What triggered it?” Lily asked. Instantly, James became more guarded, so Lily hazarded, “I know
he’s upset about his family. I’m just asking what brought this on specifically.”

James’ measured his answer precisely. “It was one of those confluences of little things. His brother was being a prat today, and it’s the four-month anniversary of his dad’s death. And, he saw Franklin Berry today. He cut his hand at dinner, lots of blood. All of it just brought back bad memories.”

“Bad memories of what?”

Lily hadn’t meant to ask the question aloud. She knew that James would shut down and refuse to respond rather than reveal Sirius’s secrets. He did just that, wary of her and her motives.

“Come on, James,” Lily tried. “He wants me to know. You saw him in there, how vulnerable he was. He wouldn’t show me that if he didn’t want me to dig deeper. If you’d heard the things he said to me! I’m not trying to be nosy or pry into your business…James, I’m scared. I’m scared for him, and I’m scared for me.”

James put his hands on her shoulders, angling her body to face him directly. His face, his hands, everything about him was gentle but deathly serious. Like her, he must have been terrified for his friend – only a stone could feel otherwise – but none of that fear was present now as he confronted her. All she saw was purpose. Purpose and kindness.

“Promise me, Lily. Promise me that you’re not going to dig into this. He doesn’t want you to know. He and I may be rowing, but I still know him better than anyone, and this is a certainty. Be there for him as much as you like, as much as he’ll let you, but don’t pressure him for answers,” James said.

“The things he said to me–” Lily protested

James cut her off, “Sirius expects people to be able to read his mind and know what he wants. And it’s very rarely what comes out of his mouth. Don’t read into what he told you in there. He was overwhelmed. Just trust me on this. If you don’t want to hurt Sirius…if you don’t want to hurt me, just leave it alone.”

She nodded.

The idea of hurting James was untenable. The fact that he was already hurting was nearly too much to bear.

His hands were red, particularly around the knuckles. They’d been scraped raw with the cold, or perhaps from slamming his fist into the wall. Neither would surprise her, considering how helpless she’d felt when she first saw the devastation in Sirius’s empty eyes.

Tenderly, Lily leaned down to place a kiss against his knuckles.

Inside, Lily felt cold and dead, but James’ body burst with heat, so Lily hovered over his hand for a long moment, cheek brushing against skin and soaking in the scent of him. Her eyes drifted closed as contentment replaced all the anxiety of the past hour.

With aching softness, James brushed a tendril of hair behind her hair. Hours of conversation were communicated in those two simple gestures. Nothing had ever felt as right as James’ fingers scraping along the shell of her ear. No one had comforted her like this since she was a small girl, and she wanted to return the care a hundred-fold.

“I need to get back to Sirius,” James whispered drowsily.

“Of course,” Lily agreed.
It was only later that night, when she collapsed into her bed in Gryffindor Tower, that Lily realized James was a true magician, able to make the impossible real. It was impossible, but Lily laid in bed knowing that everything was going to be alright.

The red-eyed cuckoo clock started up with its cheeping chime of the hour, and Emmeline threw her pillow at it in a futile effort to silence its ringing. Lily, however, smiled dreamily to herself, entirely unaware of the call of the cuckoo next to her bed. The world and all its sights and sounds faded and faded to nothing, until all that was left was peace.
For a week after Sirius’s harrowing breakdown, Lily remained on edge. She felt like a yo-yo, clueless whether she’d be tossed up or down or in a trick maneuver that sent her head skidding across the ground. An event like she’d witnessed ought to have been coupled with fallout, and it was the promise of some yet undefined change that kept her on edge.

But it never came.

Sirius willed a collective amnesia over them both. He set the mood the very next morning when he kissed her and rattled on about Peeve’s antics, never mentioning what had occurred. As he smiled, Lily would cut to a memory of his lips, cast down into something more tragic. His present laughs would transform into sobs in her mind.

While Lily was holding her breath waiting on Sirius Black, the rest of the castle underwent a change that had nothing to do with them. The Quidditch Final was upon them. At three this afternoon, the Gryffindor team would take flight against Hufflepuff for a final bid to prove themselves the best, all helmed by James Potter, gone mad-eyed under the excitement.

Any awkwardness that might have lingered between James and Lily had been crushed under the switch of James’ priorities. There was no time to avoid Lily when there were laps to run, his teammate’s diets to police, and playbooks to commit to memory. Dinners were spent with Sirius at her side and James the seat across, though the conversation was limited to grunts and whispered ramblings about strategy. It was pure mania.

James wasn’t alone in being caught up in Quidditch fever. Walking to the pitch for the match, Lily had passed four separate couples in an all-out screaming match, triggered by differing house loyalties. The stands were a lesson in color-blocking, a decisive line demarcated yellow from red. To avoid confusion, a memo had been passed around Gryffindor house that no one was to wear any gold Gryffindor paraphernalia, too easily mistaken as yellow by a nervous player, who would of course interpret this as his house turning on him and jettison the whole match in response.

“Where’s your Gryffindor pride?” was the first thing Sirius said to her when he and Remus sidled up to Lily and Mei-Lin in the stands.

“It’s too hot,” Lily whined, scooting over on the bleacher because Sirius had spread his legs wide, dominating the shared space.

Lily had lasted only four minutes in her Gryffindor jumper before the sweat had begun to pool. A discrete request to Mei-Lin to sniff had confirmed that she was starting to stink as well. Lily had stripped down to her beige singlet, one neutral party amid a sea of red.

“No excuses. You know he’s superstitious,” Sirius barked. He was James. Their terrifying night together had cemented James and Lily as being on the same team in Sirius’s mind, and he assumed their entire group was unified in their solidarity with James alone.

“Fine,” Lily conceded, letting Sirius wrap her jumper around her shoulders, so that at least some of her skin would escape the itch of wool. Deciding it wasn’t enough, Sirius also bought a hat off a fourth-year sitting behind them. The cap covered her ears and blended seamlessly with her hair.
"You know, I represent our colors every day. I shouldn’t have to wear a thing."

"Eat a licorice wand, Evans, and enjoy the show," Sirius said, dismissing her hair and instead shoving a piece of candy between her lips.

She did as he said, biting the wand in two with her front teeth and turning to watch the house teams settle onto the field, the stands rising to their feet and in volume at the appearance of their day’s heroes.

Later, Lily would wonder whether she watched James throughout the match because of her long-abused feelings or if he was equally magnetic to everyone. No one else on the pitch seemed to command the air so effortlessly. James could cross the pitch in a matter of seconds, broom bristles shaking under the strain, but on his face was nothing but cold concentration. When he feinted, he fooled not only his opponents but the audience, who would lose sight of him for a few precious seconds before he reappeared with the quaffle gripped tight in the crook of his elbow. Towards the end of the match, James dove recklessly after a dropped quaffle, coming within a hair’s breadth of the packed earth of the pitch before pulling up, and screams erupted throughout the stands at this feat, girls convinced he couldn’t pull up in time. Lily didn’t worry for a second. She didn’t doubt that James would manage, the sky itself seemed to bend to his will, and she instead watched with her heart in her throat because his skill enflamed her.

Gryffindor won the match and the cup. It was a foregone conclusion. Lily didn’t look at the score, only one player’s goals mattered to her, and she didn’t leap from the stands to mob the victorious team, like her fellow Gryffindors, Sirius and Remus almost tripping down the high steps in their race to tackle James to the ground. Their victory had been guaranteed, and Lily smiled quietly, proudly from her seat.

The initial congratulations morphed subtly but conclusively into the victory celebration. The first sign was the disappearance of McGonagall, along with most of their professors, all melting away so that the Gryffindors could wreak a little deserved havoc.

Lily expected to be forgotten amid the fray, to walk back to Gryffindor Tower with Mei-Lin, who’d been silent throughout the match but now that it was over wanted to recount every second of action, critiquing poor maneuvers and predicting how the next season would play out, already two steps ahead to when her beloved Quidditch would return.

They’d barely stepped onto the winding dirt path that led up to the castle, however, before someone else’s arm had slipped around her shoulders, drawing her near. It was Sirius, cheeks stretched with happiness and eyes wet and glowing, like he’d had a few too many sips from his flask. Only a step behind were the other boys – Peter soaking up James’ proximity with the slack-jawed worship of an acolyte, Remus recounting his favorite plays of the match, and James, quiet as he felt the relief of a burden removed, happy less with everyone’s praise than his inner peace.

"Where were you two sneaking off to?" Sirius demanded, generously including Mei-Lin in his question.

"Just heading to the party," Lily said.

"Wherever we are is the party," Sirius said, earning a barking laugh from Remus.

Sirius’s claim was based in reality. As they walked, they were swarmed by celebrating Gryffindors, members of the team congratulating their captain. If not for Sirius’s hand in hers, Lily might have been lost amid the fray. It was like Gryffindor house had doubled in size. The faces were familiar, but Lily had never seen so many massed together before.
Like Lily had feared, their little group could not stay together through the press of bodies moving up the Grand Staircase. Mei-Lin disappeared first. Then, Remus. At the top of the stairs, Sirius dragged Lily and James to the side, abandoning Peter to the surging crowd as well. The three of them stood, safely tucked in an alcove behind a suit of armor. In the narrow space, Lily had to press her chest into Sirius, and she could feel the heat of James against her side.

James accepted Sirius’s random attack, but Lily couldn’t resist to ask the question, “What on earth? Why’d you drag us over here?”

“Because. I wanted to take a minute to appreciate James before we join the party and lose him to all his fanatic followers,” Sirius said.

“I don’t have any fanatic followers,” James protested, “Amy Sheridan is eleven and hardly fanatical.”

“Well, all the same. Congratulations, James,” Lily said, smiling shyly.

He accepted the praise lightly. “The team worked hard all season and played brilliantly. I got seriously lucky this year.”

“I think they got lucky having you as a captain,” Lily corrected.

“Yeah, mate. You played like a god. Take a minute and just breath it in,” Sirius ordered.

Lily imagined she knew how James was feeling, and it wasn’t giddy with success. After completing one of her investigative pieces, Lily always crashed. The lead up and pressure she put on herself to find the truth led her to the precipice, and she never knew how to react after hitting the ground. Sometimes there was a scrambling for some new project to occupy her time. Other times it was relief because she’d opened such a chasm of want that failure had invaded her dreams, and it was just a liberation to have it all over.

“You did it,” Lily said gently. “Now you get to rest. You’ve achieved what every captain wants, and from here, it’s all fun.”

James removed his glasses, wiping the lenses against his sweat-soaked robes. “Thanks, both of you. I’m just…the adrenaline. I need to sit down or nap, I think. Then, I’ll be just fine.”

“Well, you can’t do either. What you can do is have a drink,” Sirius said, offering a flask of firewhiskey.

James grimaced, but he accepted the drink. The corners of his eyes wrinkled when the drink burned the back of his throat. “Ugh, that’s the strong stuff.”

Ignoring him, Sirius said, “The real reason I wanted a moment alone is because you’re my two favorite people in the world—”

“What about Remus?” Lily asked immediately.

“Pete would literally cry if he heard you say that,” James said just as quickly.

Waving his hands irritably, Sirius amended, “Yes, obviously Remus is as well. And yes, yes, Peter, too. But what I’m trying to say, is that we’re celebrating tonight, and I want my best mate and my girl by my side. The three of us together. That’s what I want.”

Lily thought this was the closest Sirius would come to acknowledging his breakdown. The three of
them had been together then, Lily and James teaming up to comfort Sirius, pseudo-parental figures to compensate for what was missing from his life. They’d made a good team, and there was something budding, the teasing of permanence. Lily met James’ eyes. He’d returned his glasses to the bridge of his nose, and he watched her keenly. Without breaking eye contact, James nodded. And, it was decided.

For the rest of the night, it would be the three of them.

Lily didn’t ask if their triad had an expiration date.

In many regards, Severus Snape had been a disappointment to Lily Evans. Forget the moralizing, the tug-of-war strain of their friendship in its last days, and the gut-punch of betrayal when he made a choice, prioritized something else over their playground promises, grubby pinkies locked tight, like two hooked fingers would be enough to weld them together forever. No, before the end, those halcyon days of blinking opportunity, Severus Snape had already been a disappointment.

He was a wizard, but in every aspect, he failed Lily’s mighty expectations. To start, there was the matter of his dress. He wore black, which was appropriate, but nothing ever seemed to fit, threading gone loose in his collars from stretching a shirt out year-after-year, making every quid last before creeping shamefaced to his parents to admit he needed new clothes. The visible wear of poverty, common in Cokeworth, so that Severus blended too seamlessly into the droves of children on the playground. Not once did he wear a pointed hat.

Then, there was his hatred of animals. Sev didn’t possess an animal familiar, like any good wizard would. Once, Lily had sought to rectify his error, hunting down a neighborhood stray, and plopping the harried cat at Severus’s feet, triumphant. Lily couldn’t recall who had hissed their indignation louder: the cat or Severus.

Worst of all, there was Spinner’s End.

Educated on a childhood of books and movies, Lily knew the proper accommodations for a wizard, and Spinner’s End simply did not pass muster. No neighborhood in Cokeworth revealed the scars of post-industrial decline as clearly. Parents warned their children, those from decent homes, not to stray to Spinner’s End at night. The sense of decay might have worked in its favor, making a suitable home for dark wizards at least, but the row homes were too uniform, standard brick and always covered by a haze of smoke drifting from down river. Nothing magical could possibly grow betwixt such homogeneity. Garbage littered the streets. It smelled. And, most damning of all, there was no garden.

Lily felt, then and now, that a garden was essential to a successful witch. It ought to be an overgrown, riotous thing, impossible to navigate without a machete to hack away at the thick foliage that grew up on all sides. The ground should be littered with treasures, ingredients for the witch’s many potions, and people far and wide would line up to peer into the garden’s depths, a black hole. A secret, hidden place.

In their postage stamp of a yard, Lily had started a garden. It was a project that earned Petunia’s approval, which meant sacrificing her dream of fanciful herbs. Petunia would roll her eyes if Lily sacrificed any valuable terrain to lemon grass or fumitory, when there were tomatoes and thyme to nurture from the ground and straight into supper.
Hogwarts gave root to Lily’s fantasies. On the edge of the Forbidden Forest, she’d been permitted to start her own garden of potions ingredients, which she delivered by the basketful to Slughorn every season. Her garden wasn’t the chaotic tangle she’d always intended, but she could look into the Forbidden Forest and achieve the same effect, the same swelling of mystery.

It was early morning, the sun shy behind a shield of clouds. Where Lily knelt by her little garden, the dew had dried, and soft dirt collected on her bare knees. She was surrounded by the evidence of her labors. There were patches of alyssum; sprouts of lovage that had grown taller than her at full-height; comfrey, squat and planted right on the edge of the forest to benefit from the clinging damp; hyssop, not yet in bloom, but quivering with in anticipation as the sun grew hotter and its date neared; and shoots of angelica, already blossoming, their deaths ominously near.

The nettle was ready for harvest. That’s how she’d come to be settled in her little garden with James Potter, hands secured in dragonhide gloves and dutifully working by her side. It had been a cool spring, so the plant had only just crested thirty-centimeters, the leaves still purplish with fast-waning immaturity.

True to their promise to Sirius, they’d remained by his side until three in the morning, long after most of Gryffindor house had collapsed into exhaustion. Lily had drunk more than her fill and required constant pinching to stay awake. Mei-Lin, the only sober one, had taken on this responsibility with solemnity; Lily thought she might never forget the moment Sirius offered Mei-Lin his spit-soaked flask and learned the girl didn’t drink, his face wrinkling in shocked disbelief, like he’d never considered someone might choose sobriety.

Sirius was still asleep now, curled up in bed and snoring loudly, according to James. Unlike his mate, James had risen with the dawn to throw up and found himself incapable of returning to sleep. With his choice of company limited by everyone’s collective hangovers, James had eagerly volunteered to join her in her work. So here they were.

“Don’t cut that yet,” James ordered sharply.

He touched Lily’s wrist, where she’d brought her knife to a stem of thyme. Rather than grab her, James merely placed his fingers against her wrist, hovering near her pulse.

“Why not?” Lily asked. Thyme was hardly some exotic herb, unfamiliar to her. “You harvest thyme before it fully matures.”

“Yeah, but there’s a sweet spot. Let this little guy grow just a few more days, and when you do harvest him, he’ll be at peak potency,” James said, fondly tapping the plant. He plucked a small leaf and popped it into his mouth with a proud smile.

Lily took his advice. She was fast realizing that James was an expert on plants of all kinds, a side-effect of growing up in a household dedicated to experimental potions. James wasn’t a genius. When it came to brewing, his father’s ingenuity skipped a generation; but, he’d developed a special intuition when it came to herbs and ingredients, favoring his mother. If Fleamont Potter was the eccentric genius pottering in his storerooms at a potion that was as likely to burn the house down as cure pimples instantly, Euphemia Potter was the discipline of the operation, an upright Englishwoman, always talking about the benefits of fresh air and brisk walks.

Initially, the Sleekazy company only interested itself in potions invention, but Grindelwald’s reign of terror in Europe had cut the Potters off from many of their most essential ingredients, brought austerity. It was then that Euphemia decided they would become as independent from the outside world as possible. They constructed their first greenhouse in 1938, built their first pen for magical creatures in 1942, and they’d expanded both operations year by year ever since. By 1977, they were
the largest producer of magical herbs and creatures in south-western England. A true magical garden, just like Lily had always imagined.

“It must have been lovely, growing up like that, surrounded by all those plants, all that magic,” Lily said.

“Education, definitely.” James agreed. “I’m always surprised, actually, that I know so much about herbology because I was never passionate about them growing up. I cared way more about the creatures we kept on the grounds. That’s probably because I was right obsessed with our groundskeeper, though more than because I had an affinity for the creatures themselves.”

“What was his name?” Lily asked. She’d taken to asking James all kind of questions in the past weeks, collecting them jealously as if she might fill out the interior of his life if she could just memorize the right banal trivia.

“Bellamy. Bellamy Erikson,” James said. He got a funny sort of smile on his face as he reminisced. “I didn’t have a lonely childhood, but the boys in the village had to attend school and my parents worked, so I’d have a lot of time to myself during the week. I was supposed to be looking after my own schooling, but my tutor was this dowdy fart, Flynn, and he’d smash all my lessons before lunch, so he could nap or toss off or whatever he got up to when I wasn’t looking. So, most afternoons, I’d choose to find Bellamy and follow him around the estate. He was a wizard, but he did a lot of things the muggle way, which I thought was wickedly cool at the time. Though, in retrospect, he may just not have had the knack for household spells.”

In her mind, Lily imagined Bellamy into existence. He’d be an older man, with more grey than black in his beard. On top of his head, he’d always wear an ascot cap, something bright and garish so that James could spot him from across the grounds. He’d be well-built, perhaps a former rugby player gone to seed, and his age would show on rainy days, exaggerating a limp in his left leg. With James, he’d feign mild irritation, but behind it would be affection for the boy and his fast-moving mind.

James continued, “He’d let me chase after him, dogging his heels to the point the backs of his shoes wore out every few months from me accidentally stepping on them. He’d always get so mad, too, cursing enough to send a barmaid reeling. But I never thought much of it. It was just his manner. I’d watch him pull weeds, chop wood, degnome the gardens. We kept the lawn neat, so he was always busy at work, fighting off the encroachment of nature. My favorite bit was that he was also responsible for the menagerie. We kept most of the animals in this paddock that we call the den, a pseudo-greenhouse for the more sensitive creatures that shouldn’t be left to roam. Bellamy wasn’t responsible for harvesting the potions ingredients from them, that was Carmen, who had me convinced for the first ten years of my life that she slaughtered them all – she doesn’t, so naturally I despised her and never truly stopped. Anyway, Bellamy would do the more nurturing work: feeding them, grooming them, making sure they took their medicine. I’d have never admitted it at the time, but Bellamy was my role model growing up. I wanted to wear his skin.”

Funnily enough, that was how Lily felt, like she wanted to crawl under James’ skin and just rest there for a moment. The world was full of pretenders, people playacting at apathy, so often mistaken for sophistication, but not James Potter. He was so confident, unafraid to wear his passions where the world could see them. He was a kindred spirit.

These thoughts, so romantic in nature, slid uneasily through her mind. She felt slimy just for entertaining them in the privacy of her brain, but it had become more and more impossible to banish these sneaking feelings as she and James spent time together. She couldn’t remain unaffected by him, pass it off as mere admiration. Every time he spoke, he engulfed her. Just like she wanted.

“We could harvest some of the elderflower, too,” Lily said, purposefully drifting away from the
praise that lay poised on the tip of her tongue.

Elderflower trees were always in high demand as their bark made for excellent wands, but Lily had planted a row of Elderflower bushes instead. She valued their beauty more than their magical properties. The creamy-white flowers clustered together. They were delicate, the kind of small flowers one might embroider onto a skirt hem. Most incredible was their scent. Walking along the path, she could smell as the elderflower bushes grew nearer, their light scent drifting on a zephyr to delight her senses. They smelled like summer and bloomed in spring, a promise, a portent of what was to come.

“You’re just trying to work with the pretty plants that don’t sting. Pure selfishness,” James accused.

“You found me out,” Lily said, smugly stripping off her gloves and leaving James to the nettles and their bite.


“I’m not going to use these for potions’ ingredients. I’m going to brew it into a tea. You’re not the only one who knows something about herbology,” Lily said.

James frowned, immediately conciliatory. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to make out like you were ignorant. I know you’re brilliant.”

It was absurd that the heart was viewed as the organ of love because the swoop and tingle of satisfaction settled in her stomach, growing more indulgently delicious with every passing second. People never called her “brilliant.” They called her “annoying” or “mad” if they liked her. Never “brilliant.”

Lily wondered if she could return the favor. Had she ever said something off-hand that had sent James spiraling into this place of nerves and tingling? At the idea of possessing the power to move him in that way, Lily had to work to keep a glowing smile from encompassing her face.

“That means a lot coming from you,” Lily admitted shyly. “I’ve always admired how smart you are. I look at you in classes and the connections you make between the different readings and subjects… it’s really impressive.”

“Always? You’re telling me you admired a thing about me in third-year?” James teased.

“Alright, maybe not always. In third-year, I was probably just irritated and pretended you didn’t exist whenever you insisted on being clever about something. It didn’t mesh well with my image of you,” Lily agreed.

“I was a right prick,” James said easily.

“Was?” Lily challenged. “You’re still a right prick!”

“Come on, I’m a lesser prick to be sure,” James said.

He casually proffered his satchel. Inside was the newest package of fresh fruit from his parents, and Lily gladly accepted a plum. The left-side was richly purple, the other bruised and black. Lily held it by the beaten end and took an enthusiastic bite, the juice exploding in her mouth and burbling along her lower lip.

“Fine, you’re alright nowadays,” Lily said.
The 180-degree turn in James’ character deserved far more praise. Lily ought to tell him that she had noticed how he never harassed vulnerable students for a joke anymore or that he was an award-worthy friend or that she wanted to kiss him whenever he stood up for muggleborns, a more outspoken advocate than any of the professors. She couldn’t share these things, but when she looked James in the eye, she thought he might already know.

“You never told me more about your theory class. Did you make the breakthrough you were researching?” Lily said when James made no move to let the probing silence dissipate.

“I think so. It’s just a theory, but hell, that’s the class,” James said. “Okay, so what does the spell ‘Reparo’ do?”

“Repair something that’s broken.”

“Right, or at least, right if you’re a consequentialist. But how? It doesn’t work on everything. Otherwise, there wouldn’t be a broken object in the world, but we have disrepair same as muggles. Let me put it another way, could you walk into the Parthenon, aim a Reparo at a crumbling wall and return it to its pristine condition, think newly built?” James said.

Lily took a minute to answer, thinking through the problem. “No…Reparos only work with things newly broken. If you’re as powerful as say, Dumbledore, you could repair something broken for longer, but the proximity of the break depends on the power of the magic.”

James applauded, three sharp claps. “Exactly! If a Reparo simply repaired something broken, all that would matter would be having the requisite pieces. Something else is going on. I think, or at least, my theory is that a Reparo doesn’t put together something that’s broken. They’re time magic. They return an object to the state it was in previously. Isolated time travel.”

“That’s…”

“Nearly impossible to prove as it turns out, but I’m working on it as my final project. I think I’ll get an ‘O’ regardless,” James said.

“No! That’s bloody brilliant. I mean, that’s a full-fledged discovery. A tenable theory. A…my God!” Lily was in danger of hyperventilating. She was so envious that she worried she’d choke on it. She wanted to find a way to do a full brain transplant and steal the fast-moving thoughts right out of his head. Newly seventeen and he was on the brink of making a difference in his field. Lily had three months on him age-wise and hadn’t come close.

Surely, he must understand her then. Surely, he must understand the never-ceasing countdown that dogged her footsteps and urged her to work harder and longer, to complete something while she still had time. No one else ever understood.

“Shite!” James reared back nursing his wrist. He’d carelessly brushed it, bare-skinned against the nettles.

“Here, let me,” Lily ordered.

Dock leaf could alleviate the itch of nettle stings, and Lily had some on hand for just such an occasion. Obediently, James stripped off his gloves to allow her to work. James sat still as she took his hand in hers and rubbed the unimpressive leaf over his wrist in slow strokes. There was nothing magical about this remedy, discovered by muggles centuries before and passed along through family lore. James watched her carefully as her fingers danced against his skin.

“They say you can also urinate on it,” James said. There was something odd in his voice, a
“Best of luck with that,” Lily muttered.

After rubbing his wrist for a few minutes, Lily realized they’d been holding hands the entire time. The treatment should have lasted thirty seconds at most. Warily, she looked to James for a reaction, but his eyes were closed, and he was breathing deep, like he was falling asleep under her light-touched ministrations. The first intimacy a person ever experienced was with their mother, the bare-throated vulnerability and trust of taking care of someone and being taken care of in return. Lily was reminded of it.

Reciprocity wasn’t at the core of most of her friendships, but Lily felt the need for it with James. He exposed something of himself, and so she would do so in turn. “Impress me,” he’d told her once. She wanted to do it again and again and again.

Softly, Lily said, “You know, I can never really describe my mother? I never got to know her. When you’re a child, your parents are just your parents. They’re just roles meant to protect you. Not people. You don’t respect them as individuals, don’t care that they have their own foibles or hopes outside of you. They’re supposed to exist for you solely. Now that I’m older, I know who my father is, even if we’re not close. But my mum…I never got that opportunity.”

It was perhaps the deepest secret she harbored, certainly the deepest she’d ever exposed to someone else. Bereaved children often fretted over forgetting what their parents were like. Lily hadn’t forgotten anything. She remembered her mother with perfect clarity; but, she didn’t know her – every action and every word filtered through the shallow myopia of childhood dramas – and never would.

James studied her with one of his unreadable expressions. Again, Lily thought he must understand her because he didn’t seem surprised by her sudden revelation. To him, there was nothing sudden about it. He squeezed her hand but didn’t let it go.

“I think everyone worries about knowing their parents fully. They don’t want us to know them, and we become like detectives seeking out the truth behind the mask of responsibility. I sometimes feel that way, and when I do, I try to think of a time when my parents were happy, truly and genuinely happy,” James said.

“Happy?”

“Yeah, because I figure that even if I never fully understand them, I’ve seen them in these moments that they don’t share with anyone else. And if you can figure out what makes a person truly happy, well, then you understand that person, or at least what’s important to them,” James elaborated. “…Tell me about a time when your mum was happy.”

Lily bunched the loose fabric of her trousers in her hands. She feared the words wouldn’t come after James imbued the memory with such significance. But they did. Haltingly at first, Lily told him about a trip to the shore, the Evans’ only holiday as a full-family that Lily could remember.

She’d been six or seven. They’d spent the first day on the beach. Petunia had buried Lily under a ton of sand, while Lily luxuriated in her sister’s undivided attention. Her mum had sunbathed by their side, quiet as she communed with the sun, and, when it was time to return to their rented house, she’d helped unpack the sand from around Lily’s body. On day two, her mum had woken to a vicious sunburn – first, all red followed by the shedding skin that decorated their house like fallen snow. Too embarrassed to stray into public, her mum had stayed locked in the house for the next several days, Lily and Petunia at her side. The whole holiday became dedicated to nothing but her children.
She let Lily try her first lobster, a real one. They went to a shack on the water, where they watched the fisherman deliver it fresh and then cook it in front of them. Petunia had been visibly scared but couldn’t cry because Lily didn’t, and it would make her look like a baby, so she’d had to slurp it right up. And it was amazing. Their daddy had been so sweet that week, too, letting Lily sit on his lap when he told stories about his football days and getting reprimanded in school. They’d all laughed uproariously at Lily because her hair was a mess, all whipped up from the sea wind, and looking like some kind of furball alight with static electricity. But her mum, God she’d looked beautiful, all the salt just made her look earthy and healthy, even as the skin peeled from her nose. She’d been happy that week. Lily was sure of it.

All the appeal of James’ hyperactive, brilliant brain wasn’t worth sacrificing a single detail of that memory. She’d rather be dull and unaccomplished than part with a second of her mum.

“I wish I could have met her,” James said.

Despite being relatively private about her family life, Lily had discussed her mother with several people at Hogwarts and several more outside it. No one had ever said they wished they could have met her.

“Stop it, or I’m going to start crying,” Lily said.

“Alright then, how about…a handstand contest?” James gave her hand one final pulse before releasing it, bounding to his feet.

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard,” Lily protested.

“Why?”

“Because I can’t do a handstand,” Lily said, setting them both off into a round of snickering.

James helped her to her feet, dead set on educating her. Exceptionalism in the field of gymnastics probably wasn’t in the cards for her, though Lily did admire the discipline of the sport. She’d watched Avril Lennox’s all-around performance at the Olympics the year before and marveled at the strength it must take to transform a body into a gravity-defying missile, marveled even more at Lennox’s distinction as the first British woman to make the all-around finals at the Olympic games. Lily figured she’d personally achieve more by going inside and reading a book or cataloguing her herbs, but she didn’t want to go inside. She was right where she wanted to be, having fun with James.

For the first attempt, James let Lily try alone. Planting her hands on the ground, Lily flung her legs upward, kicked wildly, and fell into a haphazard somersault that would leave bruises up and down her bum. She resurfaced with grass sticking to her hair. After that, James modeled what a handstand should look like, and Lily quickly decided she very much liked this game as it caused his shirt to drop to his armpits and put his stomach on gratifying display. They counted out loud together how many “steps” he could take on his hands before toppling sideways: six. Then, it was Lily’s turn again.

Insisting on helping her, James instructed Lily to plant her hands once again. This time, he grabbed her by the waist and hauled upwards. Lily screamed bloody murder as she scrambled to stay balanced with her world turned upside down. As James laughed, she told him that the acceleration of gravity on Earth was -9.2 meters per second, much taller than her, so it was perfectly natural to be nervous because she was going to crash into the ground in less than a second if he made a mistake.

“Straighten your legs. Lily, straighten your legs!” James said with all the force of his command lost
“I can’t!” Lily wailed.

Whenever she tried, all she managed was to kick like a newborn colt, endangering James’ glasses in the process. With one hand, he steadied her hip, and with the other, he engulfed her calf to keep her legs relatively straight. They were able to hold the post – a sloppy but at least recognizable handstand – for a half a second before Lily’s arms gave way, and she went down in a heap. James dropped to his butt beside her with considerably more grace. Lying on her stomach and head buried in her arms, Lily laughed so hard that her tears mixed with the morning dew.

Overhead a plane flew by. Lily flipped over to watch it; she and James both silent, eyes trained on the trail of clouds in its wake. It was one of those odd intersections of her life before and her life now. The passengers overhead saw nothing but an old ruin. It seemed patently unfair that the passengers and pilots were robbed of such a beautiful sight.

Lily set to righting herself, plucking bits of grass and dirt from her robes. The plane disappeared over the horizon. Eyes returned to earth, Lily twirled a clover, found in her collar, about a few times in consideration. There was something she wanted to ask, and she always let her curiosity get the better of her judgment.

“James…I know we’ve discussed this before, but um…why did you say no…to me about asking you out, I mean?” Lily said.

James gaped at her. “Are you completely mad?”

“Yes, kind of my thing,” Lily said.

“Can I remind you that the last time we had this discussion, you ended up in the bleeding Hospital Wing? Merlin! Let it go!” James said, less annoyed than when they’d broached the subject in the past but still cold.

“Right, I just…the answers you’ve given me left me more confused, not less, and curiosity’s kind of my mortal flaw, definitely the thing that’ll get me killed someday, so I was just hoping you might explain things for once instead of just getting angry at me for daring to ask,” Lily said, clasping her hands together in supplication.

James had removed his robes, so he had no pockets in which to bury his hands, flapping awkwardly at his sides. They then made their way to his hair, mussing it until it looked like he’d been savaged by an army of pixies. She liked it when he did that, made a big physical show of his emotions; it gave her a fighting chance of understanding him. Of course, James messed with his hair so frequently that it could mean any number of emotions: embarrassment, anxiety, consideration, helplessness.

“If I tell you, will you promise to never bring it up again? Just put that chapter behind us?” James asked wearily, eyes closed.

Lily murmured her agreement.

“It’s not all that complicated,” James said blandly. “You remember what I told you before…before you fainted?”

“Yes.”

Like she could forget! He’d said he loved her, like that made a lick of sense in sorting out why he
hadn’t taken her to that twice-damned party. But it had introduced doubt into the equation. She’d begun to suspect her early beliefs were wrong, maybe he hadn’t rejected her in order to chase after other girls.

“Well, if you were going to ask me out, I wanted it to be because you wanted to be with me, not because you were trying to prove a point to Will about how you could be wild or whatever that was. Figured I’d have another shot to ask you out when it actually meant something,” James said.

“That wasn’t why I asked you,” Lily said. She felt as if she was standing in a circular room, doors leading in every direction, only one of which led to honesty and the rest committing her to one lie or another. She didn’t know how to navigate her way through it. “I’m not saying I didn’t have some ulterior motive…erm, but I asked you because I wanted to go with you. Because I liked you.”

It took less than a second to undo most of their work of an hour as James roughly shoved their satchel of herbs to the side. James watched them spill out dispassionately, couldn’t summon up a response because all of his energy was centered on his current fury. If he continued to work his jaw back and forth, Lily worried it might unhinge like a snake’s and eat her.

“Fuck. Fuck! Lily, you – fuck – you couldn’t have told me that before…” James alternately growled and shouted through his temper tantrum.

“How could I have told you? I can’t read minds, James. I took you at your word that you wanted to date other girls!” Lily said.

“Maybe you might have figured it out from how I’ve fawned over you for years straight. Merlin, Lily, how much attention does a bloke need to show you before he figures he might be interested?” James demanded.

“It’s in inverse proportion to how much attention said blokes give to girls like Danyal Shafiq,” Lily shot back.

James raised his finger, actually pointing it in her face. “Don’t start on that again!”

She was mightily tempted to bite his finger down to the nub.

“Well, isn’t it just a day for Gryffindor solidarity?”

Lily had to turn to make out the voice, but James recognized Sirius’s booming call immediately and his shoulders sagged. Coming their way down the path was Sirius alongside Remus and Will. From a distance, Lily couldn’t make out what Will was mouthing at her, but his less than subtle nods towards Remus gave her a good idea.

Guiltily, Lily glanced around her, looking to clean up the evidence of what she’d just shared with James. Only there was no evidence. Just a pile of nettle scattered on the grass and a half-eaten plum, fruit gone orange with exposure. James rose to his feet. His hand twitched towards her for a second and then back, like he’d considered helping her to her feet but couldn’t touch her when Sirius was watching. Between them, nothing was innocent.

“We were just finishing up. I have to revise for an Astronomy exam,” Lily said, feeling like she needed to make excuses for being with James.

“That’s adorable. Revising!” Sirius said, laughing at this novel concept.

There was no evidence of Sirius’s night of debauchery and binge drinking on his handsome face. He was uncommonly awake, alert and smiling. In comparison, Remus looked like he’d been hit by the
Knight Bus. The normally disheveled boy had upped the ante: hair unbrushed and falling at every angle, pockets turned out of his robes, his wand tucked behind his ear.

“We were going to kip down to the Three Broomsticks,” Will explained.

“Remus could use the ol’ hair of the dog. Or should I say hair of the wolf?” Sirius said amiably.

“Not funny,” Remus deadpanned.

“It’ll be a good time,” Will intervened. He affected pure nonchalance, but Lily knew better. Will should have been revising for his finals, and he was giving that up to visit Hogsmeade. Having been raised by a hard-working, self-sacrificing single mother, Will took his schooling very seriously. He figured it was the least he could do to repay her. Inside, Will was probably a riot of indecision, but his conscience had been quieted by the presence of one Remus Lupin. Love could make a person do crazy things, a less than earth-shattering observation to be sure.

“Come with us,” Sirius suggested, but Lily shook her head.

“I really need to revise.”

“This weekend then. Let’s double-date,” Sirius said.

At first, Lily thought he was referring to a double date with James, but Remus’s blush gave it away. Remus and Will! While she had been distracted, they’d somehow transferred from the realm of bashful flirtation to the dating stage! Looking awfully proud, Will tugged at his ear, a long-ago established signal that they should talk later.

“Not Friday,” James said lowly.

Sirius jolted. “Right, not Friday then. Better make it Saturday. If you can scrounge up a girl sorry enough to take you, you might as well come as well. We can make a proper night of it.”

“Err…I don’t think that’s a–” James stuttered.

“It’s a great idea! We had such fun last night. I’m down for a repeat!” Lily charged ahead. She had no idea why she’d forced the issue. She had no idea whether she even wanted James there.

James made a face. If he was glaring at her, she wouldn’t have blamed him.

“Brilliant. It’s settled. Some poor girl will stomach Prongs for the night, and we’ll test out whether Myers here is good enough for our Remus,” Sirius said cheerfully.

Lily smiled around the group, but her gaze halted on Remus. He was completely still as he looked at her. It was unnatural. Lily half expected that a gust of wind wouldn’t ruffle his hair as he stood there, inhuman. It didn’t last long before he smacked his lips together; they disappeared entirely into a white line only to reappear wet and glistening with a loud slap. It was a habit of his, one that kept his lips chapped purple as a beet in the winters, and it had never unnerved her so much before. Remus could see everything: the way James glared at her, Lily’s anxiety, Sirius’s generous smile.

“I have to go,” Lily said, urgent.

Sirius kissed her goodbye, which Lily imagined caused James’ glare to sharpen and Remus’s scrutiny to strengthen. Lily hurried away across the lawn, aware that they were all watching her for different reasons, but only one boy’s focus worried her thoughts.
Remus. He knew.

Chapter End Notes

#romance guys

Thank you to Corina for catching the grammatical issues in this chapter & 1 sentence that made zero sentence pre-editing.

I hope everyone enjoys this one as much as I did!
The Bomb

Chapter Notes

So I consider this chapter weird because it’s very long with lots of important stuff happening, and yet most of the wordcount is dedicated to the non-essential stuff. That’s how I described it to Corinaj anyway (who wonderfully beta’d this, thank you as always!) I hope that the “filler” stuff is fun, which was what I intended, even if it doesn’t move the plot.

Also, The Shrieking Shack Society is doing Awards for fanfic in the Marauders fandom, and this story’s been nominated for best WIP. If you are a voting inclined person, please head on over and vote for any stories you like, not necessarily mine. I think events like this keep fandoms alive, which means more writers, which means more content for ME to ultimately read. So this is a selfish ask, but not coming from the place you likely expected. You can vote at:
http://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdGm5P_Ehq5Sjxdut6wJd71jZbh1EMC (remove the asterisks).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Friendships were like gardens, trite but true. They required nurturing attention to flourish. Without it, they withered away and died. Of late, Lily had been a pretty neglectful gardener.

It was the Saturday of the triple date. She, Mei-Lin, and Will had all gathered together in the boys’ loo on the fifth-floor to get ready. Every fifteen minutes, a bloke would come careening inside, take one look at the girls – Lily propped on the sink edge, shaving her legs, and Mei-Lin sitting on the floor with her waist-length hair sprawled around her like seaweed – and turn about like the room was on fire.

It wasn’t the first time they had commandeered a bathroom on a Saturday night, and experience had taught them that girls reacted far worse to the sight of Will in their washroom, or at least, they screamed louder. Mixed-house friendships were tricky by nature. Hogwarts wasn’t big on private spaces for students from different houses to socialize, so it required a degree of invention. In the loo, they were guaranteed a space to themselves.

Better yet, they’d learned in fourth-year that the loo had marvelous acoustics. The three of them would sit on the toilet in separate stalls and sing the latest release from Queen or the Mincing Manticores. Nowhere else in Hogwarts could a group of students gather and sing, safe from prying ears. Out of sight from her friends, Lily would feel freedom frothing in her veins. She was alone in a stall, alone to sing as loudly or as off-key as she so pleased. Sometimes, she’d put in an effort, three voices would weave together in a harmony that vibrated off stone walls and shook the singers to their foundations; it was effortless. Other times, they’d dance and screech the lyrics, like Bacchus had possessed them and the cacophony overshadowed the worst of Peeves’ disruptions.

There would be no singing, tonight, however. Turning to Will, Lily instead asked, “Tell me again how you managed to ensnare Remus.”

She’d already heard the story, breathlessly demanded it Wednesday at their meeting of the paper, but it brought Will such joy to share it, and it spared Lily some of her shame. After all, she ought to have
caught the signs that Remus was taking an interest in Will. Only her myopia and dedication to the article could have made her so blind. Mei-Lin hadn’t been taken by surprise at all.

“It was a two-part strategy,” Will said. “Part one, make sure any time Remus turned around, I was there with my most winning smile.”

“Creepy,” Mei-Lin said.

“Honestly, yeah, a bit. But for someone so beautiful, Remus has the self-confidence of a fat girl,” Will said, to which Lily and Mei-Lin both shouted a protest that was merely waved aside. “I’m just saying, I could tell that he didn’t really believe I liked him, despite my best tricks, so persistence was key.”

“Like Potter and Lily. It took her like four years to figure out he may fancy her. I thought he was going to have to write his undying love in a letter and drown himself in the Black Lake before she took notice,” Mei-Lin chimed in.

Lily scowled, but Will agreed. “Exactly! So part one was to make it painfully obvious that I’m into him. Part two was to connect on an intellectual level.”

“You have an intellectual level?” Mei-Lin, predictably, asked.

Will ignored her. “I happened upon Remus in the library, the Care of Magical Creatures stacks –”

“Please tell me you weren’t actually stalking him,” Lily pleaded.

“I happened upon Remus and figured it was perfect. My mum had profiled Newt Scamander back in the 50s, so I let drop a few interesting tidbits, and Remus lit up. You should have seen his smile – so shy and sweet! After that, it was hellos in the halls, and after that, revising together. All leading up to now: the date!”

“You should write a book: How to Catch a Man,” Lily suggested.

“Or an article at the very least. Think Dorcas will go for it?” Will asked.

Lily patted her now shaven legs, debated lotion and rejected it. She wasn’t going to let Sirius feel her up. She hopped off the sink and shimmed her skirt down, so that it graced her kneecaps. Her outfit was nothing special: collared shirt, modest skirt, and a jumper. In fact, it wasn’t dissimilar to the outfit nuns in Cokeworth would wear when they ventured into town for the shopping.

Will had been furious when he first realized what Lily intended to wear. The outfits he’d prepared – laid out neatly in rows along the lavatory floor – erred toward the extreme. Will said that if Lily dressed demurely, he’d look ridiculous. Lily replied that he didn’t need her help. His potential outfits included: a pair of leather trousers, a paisley shirt, a vest with dangling tassels. Meanwhile, Lily would bet money that Remus was going to look shabby and James and Sirius would wear the same tasteful but discrete fashion they always sported.

“This is going to be so fun,” Will declared.

Mei-Lin kicked the wall in boredom. In all their years at Hogwarts, Mei-Lin had never dated anyone, not even a quick kip to Hogsmeade with another boy. She put up a good front of apathy about her eternal singledom, but Lily knew form one late-night confession that Mei-Lin felt excluded. Worse, abandoned. There was nothing Lily could do to help her. Mei-Lin was pretty and smart. Her issues weren’t cosmetic but rather her habit of turning away anyone who showed an interest in her, a hatred of strangers. Everyone was a stranger until you got to know them.
“I wish you could come,” Lily said to Mei-Lin.

“Who’s Potter taking?” Will asked. “If he hasn’t found anyone yet, you could just go together.”

Sickened at the very thought of James and Mei-Lin on a date – James and Mei-Lin with their dark heads pressed close together, James and Mei-Lin sharing a private joke, James and Mei-Lin brushing hands beneath the table – Lily quickly said, “Or Peter. You could try to go with Peter.”

“Well that’s just rude,” Will said, wrinkling his nose at her.

No matter how she played it off, her sharp insistence that Peter was the better choice stood out, and Will had been raised to miss nothing. As a boy, his mother hadn’t been a high-powered editor. She couldn’t manage the hours, while raising her son alone without a knut or quid of child support to sustain them. Instead, she’d written freelance for any publication – magical or muggle – that would accept her stories. Oftentimes, she couldn’t afford childcare and would drag her adolescent son along, peering through the windshield of the car as his mum asked questions or rooted through a dumpster. He was raised to be a Nancy Drew. One of the Boxcar children. The Hardy boys. If someone had a secret, he could sniff it out like a bloodhound.

Conceding to Lily’s boring outfit, Will ultimately forewent the glitter and drama in favor of corduroy trousers and a pressed shirt. Lily wasn’t sure he’d ever forgive her. They dropped Mei-Lin off at the library with many promises to spend time with her the next day and make up for their absence, and Lily pretended she didn’t notice that Mei-Lin’s goodbye hug with Will was warmer than the one she gifted Lily. Then, they climbed the many staircases to the owlery, where they were to meet the others, because there was nothing like starting a date drenched in sweat.

The stench of the owlery hit them before they’d opened the door. Lily had never understood the wizard community’s answer to an organized postal system. Owls were filthy, pooping birds, and they weren’t even magical! They could deliver your mail no faster than they could fly. The taxes required to manage a postal system could in no way outweigh the cost of feeding and housing owls either. They did make for a pretty picture, though.

Inside, Lily stopped short, sending Will colliding into her back. Their dates were already present and dressed to the nines: frilled white shirts, billowing capes, top hats. Lily guessed the sum cost of all this finery would exceed her father’s yearly income, yet simultaneously…they looked like children’s magicians.

“I am never forgiving you for this,” Will growled in her ear as he took in their outlandish outfits and compared to his own tame ensemble. “Never.”

“What are you two wearing?” Sirius demanded. “Didn’t you get the dress code.”

“No.”

Sirius sighed and turned to, presumably, James’ date, “Em, do you think you could?”

“Fine. Give me ten minutes.”

In a swoosh of teal skirts, Emmeline glided past. Emmeline, not Danyal. James’ date. Lily’s brain short-circuited as she tried to decide which girl would have been worse. Determinedly, Lily didn’t look at James to see his reaction.

The ten-minute wait turned out to be closer to seven. Emmeline was a health junkie and prone to taking the stairs two-at-a-time when she wasn’t in a hurry, so she was able to cut a swath through the castle in half the time it would have taken Lily. Without a hint of breathlessness, Emmeline returned,
arms draped with a dress for Lily and a top hat balancing precariously atop her folded arms.

The top hat went to Will, who was still underdressed but now at least captured the spirit of the thing. Emmeline ushered Lily to the far side of the owlery, into an alcove that housed unopened tubs of bird seed. It was out of sight of the others, but there was still something nerve-wracking about being so exposed, to hear the chatter of the boys only a few meters away while Emmeline stripped her out of her sensible outfit. The collar of Lily’s jumper was tight, so it caught on her sizable head, requiring Emmeline’s help in tugging it off. They shared an awkward smile, arms tangled together as Lily tried to shrink her body as much as possible.

Lily shimmed into the dress Emmeline had brought her. It was a long, empire-waist construction with a jeweled butterfly where the neckline finally stopped its dangerous plummet and butterfly sleeves. Emmeline and Lily boasted radically different body shapes: Emmeline was muscular and strong with a body that grew exaggeratedly wider as it descended, whereas Lily was lean, almost inconsequential, and curveless. Despite these differences, they wore around the same size, so the dress settled finely on her frame, the only eyebrow raising feature the perilous neckline.

Sneaking out the castle was embarrassingly simple. Security had turned its attention to keeping the menace out with little consideration to what may escape from within. No secret passageways, no holding their breath in the shadows as Filch prowled past. They simply walked a straight path to Hogsmeade. Their group – already ostentatious in dress – was also loud, inviting attention from anyone who might have peered out a castle window.

Infected by the joy of the weekend and one spent dangerously no less, they were jovial and affectionate. Every few steps, Sirius would swoop upon Lily and swing her in a graceful arc above the ground before dashing off, leaving Lily steps behind the group and with a laugh caught in her chest. James and Remus couldn’t keep off each other, repeatedly landing an arm on the other’s shoulders or aiming a punch at the other’s breast. Fawning, Will did everything he could to insert himself into this brotherly comradery. Serene, Emmeline was the only one with an ounce of decorum, sucking in deep breaths of the pine-scented evening sky and basking in the freedom of nature.

After some coaxing, Will dragged the plan from Remus’s pink-chapped lips. They would pick up the Knight Bus at Hogsmeade – no splinching misfortunes here – and take it to Glasgow. There was a bar there owned by a few muggleborns who had graduated Hogwarts four years earlier, which they would check out.

The sun had slipped behind a sheet of clouds, by the time they boarded the Knight Bus, and then from the sky altogether by the time they reached Glasgow. The cloud coverage remained, however, so the night sky was perfectly dark: no moon or stars to illuminate their path. The mild weather gave way to a chill, and Lily shivered in her airy sleeves.

The Knight Bus deposited them outside a two-story dark brick structure. Unlike some of the livelier clubs in London, there was no music beating through the walls. A sign identified the premises as “Three Stirs to the Left” and the line of young people standing about waiting for entry identified it as a success. Lily half-expected a problem when they reached the head of the line, all seventeen and without any identification, but James put her concerns to rest.

“All these people, they’re muggles. That’s the first floor. We’ll tell them we’re wizards and slip upstairs,” he told her. His breath ghosted across her ear, as close as they could ever get to each other.

At the door, Sirius did just that, asking for the second-floor. The bouncer looked about covertly, and then asked for proof. A password. Something to show they were truly magical, though he didn’t use the word. Sirius cast about for a second before offering up, “Diagon Alley.” The bouncer pulled
back a beaded curtain sectioning off the stairs and allowed them to pass.

Lily was outraged. “Diagon Alley? Diagon Alley? So naming any detail, no matter how widespread is enough to prove you’re a witch? A good journalist could crack that so easily! Just imagine, all it would take is someone like my sister to mention the name Hogwarts to a journalist, and they’d be able to get in!”

Margaret Bourke-White could con her way inside in a second, and if she did, images of magic would be blaring out from the cover of *Life Magazine* the very next day. Lily would like to see the Ministry fix that nightmare!

Lily’s outrage found a new avenue shortly thereafter. Glancing around the second floor of the bar, Lily discovered that she and her friends were the only patrons in formal wear. Everyone else was dressed for a casual night at a dive bar. The most ostentatious ensemble in the whole place was sported by a girl whose shirt had intricate beading sewn along the collar and wore a flower tucked into her braid; meanwhile, her date was wearing tie dye, so the effect was diminished.

“Why are we the only ones dressed up?” Lily hissed to Sirius, who was steering her towards a table by the eblow. “I was dressed just fine before.”

“Isn’t it obvious? The top hats!” Sirius said.

Overhearing, Remus chimed in, “We picked these up from Diagon Alley ages ago, and we’ve been waiting for a chance to break them out.”

“Admit it. I look dashing,” Sirius ordered, modelling his hat by presenting his profile, the cut of his defined jaw and the smooth cheeks leading up to the towering hat.

“We look like mad people,” Lily said.

“We can always pretend we’re going to a fancy dress event after this,” Emmeline offered reasonably. “No one will know the difference.”

And Emmeline was right, because after the initial once over of surprise, none of the patrons cared. Surveying the establishment, Lily decided it almost wasn’t right to call Three Stirs to the Left a bar. At least, it wasn’t organized around a singular bar like Lily would have imagined. The liquor was hidden away behind closed doors. Instead, the room was filled with a scattering of high tables and equally high chairs, patrons clustered intimately around them. At the frontend of the room was a stage for nights with musical acts.

Everything Lily learned about the bar impressed her. Inspired by their heritage, its muggle-born owners had built it with a theme of integration, the merging of magical and muggle. While the upstairs was limited to the magical community, there were nods to muggle culture everywhere: posters of the Doors and David Soul and Garry Glitter on the walls, a television to broadcast football games on nights where magic was strictly banned on the premises, as many muggle as magical drinks on the menu. Best of all, they were prone to event nights, and Lily and her friends had arrived just in time to enroll in a trivia tournament. Keeping with the theme, the questions would cover both magical and muggle topics.

Their group took the closest available table to the stage to better screech at the presenter. Lily’s legs dangled loosely from the high chair, too long to comfortably rest on the bar that vivisected the legs but too short to reach the floor. Sirius sat on her left. In a move that Lily knew to be intentional, James took the seat directly to her right. Their thighs were all but touching under the table.
“We need a win-strategy. Like, who’s the expert in different categories, so we know who to defer to and who to curse if they let us down,” Will announced.

Lily winced, remembering the rugby debacle all over again. “It’s not about winning, Will. It’s about the joys of playing the game.”

“No. I’m pretty sure it’s about winning,” Emmeline said.

Everyone from James to Remus nodded definitively. Unwittingly, she’d found herself enrolled in a tournament with a bunch of competitive menaces.

“I know everything Quidditch,” James said without a hint of humility. “Also, herbology, magical creatures, or potions.”

“I know culture and taste. Anything to do with the big families. Hearing the family history repeated daily is finally going to pay off,” Sirius said.

Remus offered, “History.”

“Anything and everything to do with Ireland! Literature, too,” Will said proudly. “And, seems me, Evans and Vance are going to have to tackle any muggle questions alone. I can’t see you all being much help.”

“I know film, music, and sports. Also animals!” Emmeline said. “My mum and I go to the zoo easily nine times every summer. It’s my absolute favorite place.”

Everyone turned to Lily, so she rattled off her areas of perceived expertise: “English history. Science, particularly chemistry and physics, though I know a bit about biology and astrophysics as well. Government. Ancient history and ancient runes.”

“Right, we’re going to win this,” James said.

While downstairs was bustling with muggles, the upper floor was less densely populated. There were only thirty or so patrons. There were a few small groups of trivia players clustered together and one massive group of twelve that boasted loudly about their reign as trivia questions. At their blustering, James and Remus perked right up, scenting the challenge on the air. In addition to the organized teams, there were a few couples peppered throughout the room. The oldest looked to be in their late eighties, and Lily peeped at them every few seconds, wondering what they talked about after a lifetime together and charmed by the way they held hands beneath the table.

The announcer for the night was a goblin, and he stole Lily’s attention away from the elderly couple. In fact, he stole everyone’s attention when he marched onto the stage. She’d never seen such a smartly dressed goblin. His name was Strongpike, and he wore a pair of snug trousers with a green scarf dashingingly about his short neck. From his place atop the stage, Strongpike squabbled with a waiter about whether he ought to use a microphone or be given a wand to cast the “Sonorous” charm. Goblins weren’t permitted wands by law, but the microphone was prone to sputtering out in proximity to magic.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen a goblin outside Gringotts,” Lily said lowly.

“The usually keep to their own,” Sirius said. “Wizards haven’t exactly welcomed them with open arms throughout the centuries. There’s a lot of bad blood there, and they don’t much like us.”

“I want to know his life story,” Will said. Pure yearning was in his voice. If Lily lost her mind at the prospect of a scientific discovery, Will longed to crawl right into the brains of every person on the
planet and root about until he understood every motivation available to man.

Speculation about Strongpike was cut off when he began the tournament. His voice boomed through the faulty microphone announcing that they would begin with the magical questions, divided into five pithily named categories: Creature Features, A United Kingdom, A Fine Brew, Quidditch through the Ages, and They Should Make a Portrait. They would begin with the Quidditch category.

“Prongs is going to be insufferable,” Remus muttered to himself.

“Right you are, my friend,” James said with the widest grin Lily had ever seen.

The tournament began. James knew the first answer right off the back: “Stooging” was the name of the forbidden move, wherein multiple chasers from the opposing team entered the scoring area simultaneously to menace the Keeper. They were meant to write the answer onto a piece of charmed parchment, which relayed the teams’ answers to the announcer in real-time, but James still leaned in to tell them all about the history of stooging and a few choice anecdotes about using the illegal move in unregulated pickup matches.

His story filled the time until Strongpike delivered the next question. “In 1269, a golden snidget was released into a Quidditch match, which would later serve as the inspiration behind the golden snitch. The first player to capture the snidget did not win 150 points, however, but 150 of something else. What was it?”

“150 galleons,” James said.

In a half-whispered aside to Will, Remus said, “James sleeps with a copy of Quidditch through the Ages under his pillow.”

“You think he’s joking, but he’s really not.”

Lily knew he wasn’t. James may have been allergic to the four walls of the library, but he was a swot deep inside. In History of Magic, where Binns was sure not to notice, James often sat in the back with a book in his lap. He’d tried the same maneuver in Transfiguration when they were younger, and McGonagall had confiscated every book he had, textbook included, making it the first non-pornographic contraband reading material in the history of her class.

They won the next two questions just as easily. Sirius managed to beat James to one answer, jumping on the chance to mention the “Banchory Bangers” Quidditch team. Through his snickers, he admitted to just liking the name, and Lily worried aloud that she was dating a twelve-year-old boy.

The last question that round – which resident of Queerditch Marsh made the earliest reference to Quidditch while writing in her diary? – required James to work for the answer. He and Remus shared puzzled looks and mused over the possible answer, weight each name on their tongue.

“Oh, blimey! It was something awful. Sylvia Teapot…no, Mildred Kettle?” James said.

“Oh, no, no…I almost had it. That sounded familiar. Um, Keddle! Keddle not Kettle,” Remus said.

“Keddle! Keddle…Gertie Keddle!” James shouted, hurriedly putting the name to parchment.

“Shh!” Will said crossly, sparing Remus from his ire and focusing directly on James. “Can you shout the answer any louder? There’s no way the enemy three tables over didn’t hear that.”

Their drinks arrived as Will and James bickered over trivia etiquette and the tournament moved to the Potions category. Once more, James easily answered the first question. Lily had ordered something
called a Raspberry Fizz, a purplish blend of rum, lemon juice, raspberries, and seltzer. Her senses were assaulted by sweetness before being blitz-attacked by the rum, and it tingled as it slid down her throat, like drinking a cola.

Lily knew the answer the second question about which ingredients should be added to combat the side-effects of an Euphoria Elixir, but James beat her to it once again. Lightly, Emmeline chastised him that he ought to allow others a chance to answer for once. Lily didn’t blame him. It wasn’t his fault the categories so far had been custom-designed to his interests. With good humor, James agreed to zip his lips for a bit, leaving Lily to answer the next question on Tincture of demiguisse.

“Next question,” Strongpike said in his gravelly voice. “In the village of Stinchcombe, the potioneer Linfred created the potion Skele-Gro and Pepper-Up. His habit of working without hurry earned him what nickname?”

James and Sirius nearly toppled their chairs as they burst to their feet. Quickly, Lily placed a hand on her cocktail, so that it didn’t spill as the table shook like a boat at sea.

“Potterer! The Potterer!” James shouted for all the room to hear. He spared a glance for Emmeline, “Come on, Em. If anyone has the right to answer this one, it’s me.”

“James Potter, right here! Descendent of Linfred,” Sirius said just as loudly, like he was selling James at auction.

Will gnashed his teeth together. “Stop announcing the bloody answers to the whole bloody room!”

They’d boasted a perfect score up to that point, but the next question bested them. Lily watched her friends deflate like balloons as their winning streak was broken. Sirius asked her to pass the drink menu his way, which she did without much thought. She was about a quarter of the way through her drink. A moment later, Lily realized Sirius had polished off his firewhiskey and was already looking to replace it.

The trivia format introduced some order to their conversation. In between questions, they’d follow the thread of the question to more personal stories about their experiences with magic and history. One question about the *Toadstool Tales* – written by Beatrix Bloxam before she died at the tender age of sixteen, and Lily had strong opinions about the trend of prolific writers dying so young – nearly felled James with embarrassment, and Lily marveled at how she’d never seen him so mortified before. Gleefully, Sirius told the table that James could do an entire, in character, monologue from the story with many firm jabs in the side to encourage James to do just that.

“The Potters are all nutters for each other,” Sirius explained. “They do the most sickening types of family bonding you can imagine, including… poetry and short story recitals.”

“They what?”

Lily had never heard anything so unlikely in her life. In the Evans household, they could maybe round up everyone for the Christmas airing of *Spartacus* on the telly, but that was a strong maybe. If they did manage to convince their father to stay with them for the night, Petunia couldn’t be counted upon to stay seated. She was always bustling around in the background, doing the laundry or starting the next day’s dinner. Last year, she’d started up the vacuum in the middle of the arena scene, drowning out the score and ruining it for everyone. Lily and her father had yelled at her to turn it off – why couldn’t she wait the few hours for the film to end? – which prompted Petunia to burst into tears and hide in her and Lily’s shared room for the rest of the evening.

Emphatically, Sirius said, “I know! They all memorize a poem or a story, gather round the fire, and
spend a few hours performing for each other. Sometimes, they bring props. It’s disgusting.”

“He says like he isn’t a part of it,” James sneered.

“I’m just being a polite guest and joining in your nonsense,” Sirius protested.

On a tirade, James asked what they were supposed to do in a wizarding household on a rainy day, when Quidditch and travel were off the table. Like many old-money families, the Potters didn’t believe in a moment wasted and diligently filled the hours. The mornings were for reading the paper and the afternoons for tinkering on experimental potions (Fleamont) and coordinating with the merchandisers (Euphemia). Over the summers, it was expected that James wouldn’t waste a minute of sunshine and would spend his hours exploring the ground, gardening, hunting, flying at his leisure. They religiously observed tea time and dinner together as a full family, frequently with guests from around the world, potion wonks and Ministry officials; if someone needed to miss dinner, they were expected to give at least a week’s advance notice of their intentions. In the evenings, they would crowd together in the drawing room and read, debating the newest discoveries or a bill before the Wizengamot. Euphemia was especially fond of recitations, so, as a boy, James would prepare speeches on whatever he’d read the night before, ranging from magical theory to irrigation practices in India, and his parents would applaud his success and give him extra pudding as congratulations.

This healthy familial bonding was thoroughly shocking to Lily, so she imagined it must have overwhelmed Sirius when he first moved in with them. His childhood was filled with self-imposed isolation, anything to escape the critical eye of his parents. James and his privilege and glowing memories were foreign to her; she had more in common with Sirius and the darkness that he half-welcomed. Yet…Lily burned, yearned, desperate to recapture that idyllic rosiness that James painted so clearly with his words.

A thought occurred to Lily. “Oh! Is that why you had those plays, *The Fountain of Fair Fortune*, in your dormitory? I stumbled across them over April Fool’s and was so confused.”

“Oh yeah! We couldn’t figure that out. Like, why would you blokes be staging a children’s play?” Will seconded.

Smoothly, Sirius answered, “Found us out. I want to impress Mum Potter this summer. Over Christmas, I read my recitation off the page, and it was like I’d broken her heart. They butchered me for it.”

“You deserved it,” James said. “You have to memorize your piece. An absolute requirement.”

Sirius opened his mouth, a sharp retort on his tongue, but the game resumed and he missed his chance. The tournament had progressed to the ‘A United Kingdom’ category, and here everyone finally had a chance to answer. Emmeline knew the first answer, the River Wye, which she said she could always remember because it rhymed with the River Kwai. Sirius recalled the site of the concert where the Wizarding Suite, composed by Musidora Barkwith, was performed for the first and final time – Ackerly Town Hall, where it blew the roof right off after then notorious exploding tuba piece.

With the U.K. on her mind, Lily found herself studying Strongpike’s accent, looking to place his origins. West country, that much was obvious. He emphasized the “r” at the end of “river,” a rhotic speaker, but clearly not Irish or a Scot. Every word resonated with the hidden influence of the West Saxons.

Lily zeroed in on Strongpike’s mouth as he asked the next question, watching the way his lips shaped the vowels, “Hag’s Den is the colloquial name for what Irish town?”
“My time has come!” Will announced, interrupting Lily’s careful study. “Coomsallee. Gorgeous little town. Remus, you would love it.”

Will continued to wax poetic about green grass and rolling hills, like Scotland and Wales and the rest of England were nothing but pavement and industrialism. Beneath the table, Lily stomped on his foot; she had to slip off her stool and lean back wildly to reach him from across the table. Unadulterated Irish pride was going to get them all jumped in a back alley. Will sputtered out, realizing why Lily had kicked him, so she patted his hand in sympathy. Both of them knew the sting of bigotry.

At the next question, Lily pumped her fist into the air in triumph. Cornish! She would bet a galleon Strongpike was Cornish. To be honest, Strongpike had mad it too obvious omitting his prepositions and dropping a ‘ye’ into the question for good measure, but Lily still celebrated her linguistic detective work. Her victory was short-lived as she considered the question itself, about a wizard named Xavier Rastrick, who disappeared mid-tap dance in 1836.

“You know, I’m just now considering how dangerous it is to be a wizard. Exploding birthday cakes, tubas that bring the house down, and now, going missing forever. It’s a bad business.”

“I know! Muggles are so much safer with their atomic bombs and satellite wars,” Emmeline said with a snort.

Before Lily could concede, Remus interrupted, “Anyone else feel like they went a bit light on Wales in these questions? The category’s “A United Kingdom,’ and we had Scotland, England, and Ireland, but where’s Wales?”

They all chatted about this gross exclusion for several minutes, no one taking the initiative to put quill to parchment about Xavier Rastrick’s fatal tap dance routine.

Finally, James said, “I take it we don’t know the answer then?”

They did not, and their failure dropped them into second place behind the enormous team of regulars that had earlier boasted about their trivia success. It struck Lily as unfair that such a large team was competing with duos and trios. Of course their group’s combined knowledge would surpass everyone else’s.

In the final round of the magical portion of the tournament, the ‘Creature Features’ category, they failed to regain their lead, though they didn’t cede any ground either. They missed one answer. There’d been an uprising of an unnamed magical creature in the States, causing MACUSA to move operations from Washington D.C. to New York City. From the stories, you’d think you couldn’t take one step in the States without falling over a dragon or some other deadly beast, and none of their group had been able to narrow in on the proper lethal creature, in this case, the Great Sasquatch. Emmeline released a decidedly dreamy sigh as she mused over the plethora of creatures wandering freely in the United States, imagining herself among them, unhindered and baked brown beneath the sun.

When the magical trivia ended, there was a brief break to mark the transition over to the muggle questions. A server brought a platter of chips for the table, properly smothered with vinegar. Everyone diving for the plate at once was calamitous as they bat each other’s hands aside in a desperate bid to scrape together a few mouthfuls.

The muggle trivia portion was Lily’s chance to shine, and she rose brilliantly to the occasion. She ceded questions about the Troubles to Will and popular culture, like movies and music, to Emmeline, but the rest were directed straight to her. In quick succession, she answered: Japan’s first satellite was
named Ohsumi; 56 countries ratified the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1970; German Chancellor Willy Brandt made the Warsaw Genuflection in an act of humility toward the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising; the first indigenous Australian to sit in Australia’s parliament was Neville Bonner; Jim Morrison was found dead in 1971; Operation Chengiz Khan marked the start of the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971; the longest recorded year in history (by UTC context) was also 1971, having added an additional leap second; the first scientific hand-held calculator was the HP-35; and the deadliest cyclone in recorded history was the Bhola Cyclone, which killed approximately 500,000 people in Bangladesh.

Interspersed betwixt Lily’s correct answers were some that she couldn’t guess. She didn’t know the most common names of the Danish monarchs (Frederick and Christian) or the exact length of the Japanese occupation of Okinawa (27 years), or the history of the hilariously-titled Cod War between Iceland the UK. Every missed answer was a revelation of the best sort for Lily. She loved having someone point directly to her blind spots, almost like a librarian custom-tailoring a reading list to her interests. There was so much more to learn, never a risk that she’d run out of new knowledge to cram into her overstuffed brain. The unknown would always outweigh the paltry sliver of truth she laid claim to.

At the end of the competition, they lost by a single point to the large group of regulars. Everyone, except for Lily and Sirius, were devastated by the defeat. Will fell into his cups to drown out the pain of the loss, polishing off his second beer and waving to the server to bring a replacement. Sirius didn’t much care, having already drained five glasses of liquor. His tolerance greatly outstripped her own as he was always running a slight buzz, but Lily could still see these five glasses affecting him. Sirius’s eyes were tinged red and strangely vacant. It made Lily uncomfortable to watch how he outstripped his friends and, slowly but surely, eradicated himself with drink.

While Lily didn’t mind that they’d lost the game, she was distracted by something else that sent spirals of helpless and unamed fury shooting through her stomach. James had flung his arm casually around the back of Emmeline’s stool, and Emmeline rested, half-nestled into the crook his elbow created. If Lily and James so much as brushed hands over the basket of chips, they jolted; every touch was so new and meaningful and forbidden. Emmeline and James, on the other hand, shared the unspoken intimacy of ex-lovers, and they didn’t think before invading the other’s personal space. Lily wasn’t angry with either of them – couldn’t be, given the circumstances – but she was angry. Perhaps with no one but herself.

Lily didn’t know how much time passed with her staring at James and Emmeline, her eyes probably slit in fury, before she was pulled away from her anger by Remus addressing the object of her ire.

“So, Em, I heard that the prefects are betting on Head Girl for next year. I’d say you’re a shoe-in, but let me know if I should save my money. Going to put your hat in the ring?” Remus said.

There was something odd about his delivery, something that Lily couldn’t pinpoint. Remus looked straight at Lily as he asked Emmeline the question. No one else found it strange, diving straight into a debate about next year’s Head Girl. Emmeline dithered humbly at the idea that she might be named Head Girl, questioning whether she really deserved it over the other candidates, and Lily clamped her lips tightly shut, like her agreement might spill out against all common sense. Unlike Lily, everyone else thought Emmeline would make a brilliant Head Girl, and all rushed to compliment her on her marks, her role as prefect, her extracurriculars. Amidst all this praise, Lily again caught Remus watching her.

“Um, so NEWTs are around the corner, Remus. Put any thought into how many you may want to take?” Lily said. It was like blast fishing. She’d dropped the dynamite (in this case a perfectly innocuous question) into the lake to see if it turned up any dead fish (in this case, an explanation of
Remus’s off behavior).

“I don’t know,” Remus said shortly. He looked at her when he spoke, but he was already turning his head away before the final syllable had left his mouth.

“Yes, you do,” Will argued, nudging Remus in the side. “You said six just the other day, which is very impressive. Don’t you think so, Lily? He’s a genius.”

Lily agreed. “Oh, yes, very impressive. You should be proud.”

“Hm.”

Remus offered nothing else. Lily wondered whether she was exaggerating the strangeness of the conversation, whether she was imagining the stilted flow, but Will dashed her hopes it was all in her head when he outright asked Remus what was wrong with him. While Lily might miss the nuances of Remus’s displeased expression, Will did not and could, in fact, write a dissertation on the planes and twitches of Remus Lupin’s pallid face.

The trivia tournament now over, the bar turned on a magical jukebox and music flooded the room. With much cajoling, their group succeeded in convincing Strongpike to join them for a drink. Everyone sat up a little straighter as Strongpike took a seat at the table, like he was an esteemed guest they ought to impress. The goblin squeezed into the non-existence space between Lily and James, putting some much needed distance between the two. Though, that left only Emmeline snuggled into James’s side. Strongpike was a good half-meter shorter than an already short human, so he added a cushion to his stool, in order that his chin could rise above the table. Lastly, Strongpike ordered a cognac, which he drank straight and smooth.

The pestering began immediately. Lily wanted to know everything there was to share about goblin anatomy, neurology, politics. Will wanted to know everything there was to share about Strongpike’s story, how he left living so closely alongside wizards, his relationship with his family. Strongpike took their interrogation in stride, with only the occasional acerbic comment about prying, answering their questions for nearly fifteen minutes straight.

“But, how long is a female golbin’s gestation cycle?” Lily asked eagerly, her fourth question on the subject of reproduction. “Shorter than nine months, I’m sure.”

“Yes, I go to Hogwarts.”

“Then, perhaps you can check out a book on goblins? It should provide the answers,” Strongpike said as kindly as someone could when telling a girl to piss off.

Mortified, Lily apologized. She’d experienced purebloods pestering her about the intricacies of muggle culture before, and while she loved sharing knowledge with others, there was a line after which it tested her patience. Strongpike took everything in stride. It was rare to see a goblin so integrated into wizarding society, and he was accustomed to all sorts of bigoted reactions from wizards who seemed to think goblins ate, slept, and shagged all within the solemn, marble halls of Gringotts Bank.

Sirius took the attention off of Lily by asking an even more offensive question; he truly had a talent for driving the knife in deeper. If he wasn’t already sloppy drunk, Lily might have thought he’d planned it. “So He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named…Voldemort…opinion? What’dya think about him? Friend? Foe?”
“What kind of question is that?” Lily barked as James heaved a long-suffering sigh and said, “Pads…don’t.”

“What? There’s talk the goblins are throwing their lot in with the death eaters. I’m just asking where Strongpike stands,” Sirius said.

“There’s talk of the Blacks doing the same! Doesn’t mean it’s alright to ask,” Lily said.

Sirius fixed her with the darkest sneer she’d ever seen, dropping his hand from where he’d been touching her knee beneath the table. The energy of the night was chaotic and choppy, shifting from frivolity to murder with every passing minute, and they were all just riding the wave. If they were smart, someone would have cut off the drinks, insisted they go home, but the six of them seemed insistent on finishing out the night, no matter the consequences.

“I am not the supporter of the wizard, Voldemort,” Strongpike said slowly, like he knew the question was all but forgotten already in the face of Lily and Sirius’s argument. “If there are sects that are considering giving him their support, however, it is only because they see no hope with your current Minister of Magic.”

“But what He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named wants to do to muggles and muggleborns is so much worse than what the Ministry does to goblins!” Emmeline protested, the innate sense of justice that drove all Gryffindors rearing up. Perhaps, that was why they were the house of the lion, raised on two paws and poised to attack. “Things may not be perfect, but the Ministry hardly wants to round you all up and kill you all!”

“Like I said, I am not a supporter of the Lord Voldemort. The most decent wizards I’ve ever met have been muggleborns. They gave me a job here when few in wizarding society would even look at my application. I am only answering your question and telling you what many goblins think,” Strongpike said.

“Why don’t they have any hope that things will improve? I’d think that Voldemort’s movement is more antagonistic towards non-wizards than the current system,” Lily said.

“Few, if any wizards, care about us, or any other non-wizards in the magical world. Think about it. They’re half-ready to kill their own kind just for the parentage. No creature, no matter how similar to a wizard, can expect a moment of empathy, let alone support. It’s rare to meet a wizard who can see beyond the tip of their own nose,” Strongpike said.

“Oh no! That’s not true at all,” Lily burst out, unable to keep in the surge of affection that crushed her heart into a little ball and set it pulsing. “James, tell him about that opinion piece you’re writing about werewolves—” Lily turned again to Strongpike. “—Oh, it’s the most wonderful thing. See, James was so upset by the calls that werewolves ought to register not with the Ministry, but their neighbors as well. He was just so incensed because he said it was sure to cause all sorts of discrimination and suffering. He’s going to write something for the school paper, to try to convince everyone. So, you see, it’s not uncommon for wizards to care outside their own at all!”

There was a lot of shifting around and sipping of drinks after that. Sirius suffered some kind of coughing fit, which he washed down by draining the rest of Lily’s drink. James turned the most brilliant shade of red that Lily had ever seen on a person of his coloring, the kind normally reserved for gingers like her, and his hands were in danger of nesting permanently in his hair.

“That’s…I hadn’t actually committed to that, you know. I mean, I’ll do it but, it’s nothing special,” James said.
When James was confident, arrogant even, his smirks and husky voice did something to Lily’s stomach. Something that drifted slowly lower until she was shifting in her seat, drowned in delicious discomfort. His eyes would blaze with something she didn’t have to understand to leave her shaking and wet. This James, nervous and off-balance, commanded her just as entirely. She wanted to coax his confidence back into existence, to pet and compliment and be the reason he swaggered through the common room in the evening.

“Of course it’s special,” Lily protested. “The way you think is amazing. You see things I’d never notice about people and magic. It’s easy to be academic and clinical. I’m like that, but you, you, you see somehow integrate it altogether and find a way to remember people, that all that thinking is useless without something meaningful driving it. It’s not just special. It’s extraordinary.”

They were alone at the table. That’s how it felt anyway, like all their friends had discretely slipped away to give Lily and James a private moment to stare into each other’s eyes, to communicate their every fleeting thought without ever opening their mouths. For the first time, Lily understood what others meant by the term “eye-fucking.” There was so much intensity hovering between them, heat simmered beneath her skin, yet she felt cold and needy for someone – James – to wrap his arms around her, to collapse her into his body and never let go. He had the most beautiful hazel eyes, beautiful because they were alive with curiosity, beautiful because they saw inside of her to all her messy foibles and didn’t recoil but embrace.

For most of her life, Lily had wanted only one thing: to achieve something significant that would make her remembered. Looking at James, Lily forgot all about her ambitions, her ideas, and research, and she replaced it with a singular want of him.

Ice and a splash of gin spilled into Lily’s lap, sending her jolting from the table. Her stool was drenched. Gin leaked into tears in its red fabric, creeping deep into the fabric.

“Oh, Will,” Lily said. Only he didn’t sound apologetic to have doused Lily at all. There was a stack of napkins next to him, and he didn’t offer a single one to Lily. More concerned with the state of her dress, Sirius patted at her skirts with a handkerchief, murmuring about how the gin wouldn’t stain at least.

The breezy fabric of her dress did a poor job of trapping in the heat, so the ice sent goosebumps down Lily’s arm and exposed cleavage. She excused herself to go to the loo and set herself to rights. Finally, Will took the proper concerned tone and said he’d go with her. Lily walked away to laughter from the group – James not among them – as they speculated whether Lily could transfigure herself a new dress without bringing the building down.

Downstairs, the bar hosted two different loos with several stalls each. The wizarding floor upstairs, however, had only a single room loo. The lav was jarring because it was fixture like a typical muggle washroom, but electricity couldn’t run on the magical floor, so it was lit with lanterns. There was also a portrait of Albus Dumbledore – not spelled to speak, thank God – that stared down at whatever was on the toilet.

Will rushed Lily into the loo with many concerned coos. Not needing his help, Lily shrugged away his hands and made straight for the paper napkins. She wiped her skin clean and then transfigured a pair of jeans and a jumper. Transfigured clothing didn’t wear well as the fabric was flimsier and sheerer, but it would work for a night. The door clicked shut behind her.

Lily half-turned to tell Will he was a clumsy oaf, but he beat her to the punch, using every centimeter of his average height to menace her into a corner.

“What are you doing, Lily Evans?” Will all but spat.
“What are you talking about?”

“If I didn’t dump my drink on you, were you planning to just shag Potter on the table in front of everyone?” Will said.

They’d been obvious. Lily had known that. The force of attraction - and it was so much more than just physical attraction, too – that kept luring her gaze to James’ face was overpowering. She couldn’t remember to school her face or keep up with the table’s conversation when James was gazing back at her with eyes that couldn’t make out the color blue but saw her as clearly and sharply as if she was etched into his brain. A girl couldn’t remain unaffected in the face of it.

“Of course not,” Lily stuttered. “I was just –”

“You need to end it,” Will said fiercely.

Lily knew he was right, but what could she do? She hadn’t done anything to draw James to her, not intentionally at least. They were like magnets, crushing through metal or human bone as they sought one another out. Will didn’t know the whole story, about how James had told her he loved her or their afternoon in the sun, but he knew her, and she was surprised his sympathies went so easily to Sirius.

“I know it’s wrong,” Lily croaked. “I didn’t ask for him to feel this way about me. And, I don’t encourage him…or maybe I do. I don’t know! But when I started this, I didn’t expect Sirius to care at all. And he doesn’t. He doesn’t. But I see that the lies will hurt him regardless, and this was never supposed to happen. How am I supposed to make myself not feel the way I feel and–”

“I’m not worried about Black!” Will said.

“What?”

“I’m the one who told you to use him in the first place! I’m not a complete bloody hypocrite. No, I’m talking about you and James. Lily…” Will gripped her by both shoulders, and his hands were soft and kind, unlike the frustration she’d expected. “Lily, I’ve never seen you look at anyone like you have tonight. And the way he looked back at you! I know you can’t see it, but he adores you. I’ve never seen anything like it!”

“He loves me,” Lily confessed.

“I know. Trust me, after tonight, I know. Anyone bothering to look knows,” Will said with a sigh.

“Meaning Sirius,” Lily filled in.

“No, I already told you. I’m not worrying over Sirius. My heart’s breaking for you and James. Why are you torturing him like this? Why torture yourself?”

Lily’s sound of protest was weaker than the pounding of her heart, which soared at this tacit permission to take what she really wanted. Will knew why Lily and James were torturing themselves; he’d been there the night James rejected her and everything that had happened since had merely been fall out from that simple misunderstanding.

“Go out there and tell Sirius it’s over!” Will urged. “I’m not saying do it in front of everyone or leaping into James’ arms immediately after. But end things with Black, so you can start talking about things with Potter.” Sensing Lily wavering, Will added, “I just want you to be happy, love.”

Someone knocked on the door, ending the intimacy of the washroom chat. Will slipped out the
cracked door, making apologies to the person waiting, and Lily hurried changed into the transfigured clothes. She returned to the group with the wet tulle crumbled into a ball beneath the crook of her arm.

The scene at the table was one of collective joy. Strongpike stood with his arm raised, a single finger in the air in demonstration of the ‘The Point,’ held for a beat before merging seamlessly into ‘The Hustle.’ James copied the basics of the dance, though something of the essential was lost in translation. None of the grace that benefited him in the air translated on solid ground, and he bumbled through the routine. Lily fought off a smile. She felt confused and James, endearing and unselfconscious, only strengthened the emotional forces that were shredding her insides.

Lily slid into her seat beside Sirius, who immediately stretched an arm around her shoulders to pull her more firmly against his side. Busy snickering at James and lamenting the horrors of disco, Sirius didn’t look at her, but someone else’s eyes were firmly locked on them. Remus.

Now that Will had brought it to the light, Lily could see the accusation spewing from the boy, who studied Sirius’s arm around her shoulder like it was a snake. Unlike Will, Remus wasn’t concerned that Lily wasted true love, wasn’t concerned with Lily at all. He could see that even as she hung off the arm of one of his best friends, she was besotted with the other. He must hate her, and as she reflected on it, Lily found herself slipping into Remus’s mindset and agreeing.

Empathy or, maybe better, the ability to understand other’s perspectives had never come easily to Lily. While most girls her age were being urged by attentive mothers to consider other’s feelings, Lily was running the streets unsupervised. Her closest companions during the formative years of eight to eleven were Petunia and Severus, neither known for their consideration towards others and their mushy, weak feelings. The next step for Lily had always seemed so definitive, that she rarely considered how others might react to the same circumstances.

With a spirit of morbid scientific curiosity, Lily dedicated herself to the thought experiment of imagining her actions through the lens of one Remus Lupin. She had – was – using Sirius. The reason felt important to her. She believed long-held secrets and organizations that divided the wizarding world were a scourge, and she resented the existence of yet another institution hell-bent on keeping someone like her out, while half the world already seemed intent on seeing her dead. Yet, Remus would weigh the same factors – unmasking the Grindylows versus using another person – and he’d draw very different conclusions. He’d rationally break down the consequences and actions of the Grindylows, looking for any direct evidence of harm. He’d measure the potential harm of the lies he’d tell. And, most damningly, he’d have an established code of ethics, an invariable stance on what one human being owed another. Against this, Lily’s suspicions would be deemed lacking.

Lily tried to comfort herself that Sirius wouldn’t be hurt by anything she’d done, that he approached their relationship like a passing fancy with no deep feelings attached. It eased the ache somewhat, but there was still a pulsing hurt that lingered from Remus’s judgment. She didn’t want to be someone who used others, unless the end goal was so inarguably important she was left with no other choice – like, defeating that Lord Voldemort or ending world hunger – and Lily, sitting quietly on her stool while everyone else laughed around her, faced the truth that discovering the secrets of the Grindylows didn’t qualify.

She didn’t like herself much at all.

Anyone paying attention would have discovered the misery that plagued Lily. Her whole body slumped defeatedly, and she stared at the basket of chips like good conversation wasn’t flowing freely from all sides. Sirius, fully pissed and loud in her ear, didn’t heed the signals of her body language. He pet at her clumsily, mouth glancing off her ear, then, her cheek, before he settled on
nuzzling at her chin. His sugar white hands fumbled against her transfigured jumper, pulling experimentally at the fabric and trying to weasel beneath the collar to reach skin.

Lily wasn’t one to snog in public, or maybe she only wasn’t someone to snog Sirius in public – who could tell anymore? She tried to ward him off a bit by shrugging, but Sirius just pushed forward, further into her personal space until she felt like she was drowning in him, and not in the romantic sense, but truly drowning, like waves were crushing her down, down, down to her doom and air became teasingly, mercilessly absent; it was terrifying.

“Stop, please…Sirius, can you just…not. Sirius, I’m –” Lily tried to get his attention, but he was too inebriated to comprehend, her words whispered to avoid a scene. Most girlfriends wouldn’t have minded their boyfriend aiming for a quick snog, getting a little handsy below the table. He was leagues off from pressuring her for sex, and few girls were as lucky in that respect. And yet…“Christ, just get off me!”

The full attention of everyone at the table landed heavily on the couple. Lily stumbled from her stool, backing out of reach. Sirius’s pupils were blown open, injured, but she didn’t care. She just wanted to get far away from him and the lie they’d been putting on.

Lily turned to leave.

It was not one but several acts, that happened after that, which unleashed the dam of suppressed betrayal that they’d all been studiously ignoring for months. First, Sirius rose to his feet. Second, James did as well and placed a firm hand on Sirius’s chest, preventing him from following Lily. Third, Remus shot a jet of water directly into Sirius’s face with a stern order to sober up and sit down. And finally, James looked to Lily with concern, a protector.

The water left Sirius sputtering and mean, so when James reiterated the instruction to sober up, his anger somehow directed away from Remus and onto a new target.

“Go fuck yourself,” Sirius barked, slapping James’ hand away. If he’d had hackles, they would have been risen. The force of it, the unexpected snap at James, stopped Lily in her tracks.

“Sirius, please –” Remus tried.

“No! Again, fuck you. I’m going to talk to my girlfriend. So sorry if that’s a problem for you,” Sirius said.

James’ mouth twisted into something ugly. “You’re drunk. You’re drunk, and you’re not thinking, so we’re just going to sit down, have a laugh, and sober up. Okay?”

“Oh, so all’s forgiven then? Just like that?” Sirius asked.

“Yes, yes, just stop,” James said, sighing and tousling his hair. His posture was easing, like he could see the end in sight, but this was overconfidence. Sirius wasn’t done by a long shot.

“Oh, really? But how do I know I’m forgiven? How do I know that you’re actually over it and not just pretending to be, you know, like a fucking liar. While really you intend to hold it against me for the rest of my bloody life? Because it’s kind of hard to tell with you,” Sirius seethed.

“That’s completely different,” James said.

“No, no, it’s not. Remus forgave me. Remus! Yet you’re too bloody stubborn to take your head out of your –”
“I’m stubborn? You’re the stubborn one, you bellend. How many times do I have to tell you I’m trying? I’m sorry I can’t just pretend it never happened.”

“No, you’re too sanctimonious for all that. Never done a thing wrong in your life,” Sirius said.

“I’m far from perfect, but I’ve never done a thing like that,” James said coldly, and the ice in his voice almost managed to pierce through the frenzy into which Sirius had worked himself, almost managed to freeze him in place. Because their friendship was a beautiful thing. The stuff of legend at Hogwarts. Beneath the biting words, there was a bond that ought to have transcended petty schoolyard dramas, and there was nothing Sirius Black feared more in the world than the loss of it. Which, perhaps, explained why he was so overwrought at the notion that James might not forgive him something, why he picked the scab again and again, neurotically scarring what might have healed with time.

Instead of letting things drop, Sirius said, “I wouldn’t have even known. I would have gone on thinking you’d forgiven, same as Remus, same as Peter, if not for that test. You’d have just gone on lying to my face. And maybe I’m a right twat, but I’m not lying to you. I’m telling you to your fucking face that you can get bent,” Sirius snarled.

“Because I didn’t want you to be upset, you prat! But, yeah, I’m not over it. I could have died. And what about Remus –”

“I will sew your mouths shut. Both of you,” Remus interjected, now just as passionate.

His eyes darted quickly to each face in their audience. He was urgent enough, or perhaps good enough on his threat, that both Sirius and James clicked their jaws shut for a moment of unfettered peace. James sank back into his stool, mouthing apologies to Remus and looking in danger of passing out right there on the table. Still on his feet, Sirius continued to vibrate with that wild energy, and while Lily hardly understood a word that had passed between the three, she knew enough to recognize that Sirius wouldn’t let it drop. Not yet.

Warily, a hand pressed to his forehead, James said, “Some things just aren’t easy to forgive. For me at least. I’m sorry, but some things just aren’t.”

“And here we come to the crux of it,” Sirius said. He sat down as well, so that he could finger the rim of his glass. “And what falls under James Potter’s list of unforgivable? Betrayal of a friend? Stealing candy from a baby? Patricide? Can –”

“There you out of your mind?” James bellowed.

As if James’ reaction, his passion or fury, was all that he’d been waiting for, Sirius dropped his sardonic quips in favor of a rage to match James’ own. “But that’s the thing! How do I know you’ve forgiven me that? How? How? I thought you’d forgiven me for Remus, but you hadn’t? How do I know you don’t secretly hate me? That you’re not disgusted just to look at me? My father was –”

It was one of the ugliest fights Lily had ever witnessed, and yet she was still surprised when James’ wand came out. He trained it on Sirius, shooting off a quick Silencio before he could finish his sentence. Will, Remus, and Emmeline all made their excuses, hurrying away from the table, not wanting to be caught up in the middle of an outright duel.

Except, they weren’t going to duel; Lily could see that clear as day. James hadn’t silenced Sirius because he was angry and gearing up for a fight. No, James was petrified. He’d silenced Sirius because he was on the verge of revealing something secret. She could see it in the way James had now leaned over Sirius’s mutinous form, the way Remus collapsed in relief, the way James’ wand
now lay forgotten on the table.

“Are you mad?” James just kept asking on repeat. “Don’t say another word tonight. Do you understand? I’m not going to watch you self-destruct like this.”

Internally, James must have churned with rage. He had a temper, and Sirius couldn’t have tried harder to stoke it into life. Dominating that anger, however, was pure concern.

And she didn’t want to find out why.

For once, Lily abandoned her curiosity. The three boys were shaken and hurt, and it would have been easy to stick around to listen to the scraps of their conversation, like she was collecting breadcrumbs for her investigation. But she wanted to give them the privacy to convalesce without fear of her prying eyes. Maybe she was also afraid of what she might hear.

Either way, Lily ran. She flung open the door to the bar and tore down the stairs, missing several in her flight. The muggle-friendly club downstairs was crowded and overwhelming in its own right. They were blasting some punk rock diatribe at ear-splitting volumes, and everyone was shaking their hair out and dancing with the rage of a people struggling to afford groceries with inflation through the roof and fearing the bomb might take out their family every time they went to drop a letter in the post. It was easy to lose herself in it, the dark tangled mass of bodies wailing lyrics that transcended English to become something else, something feral.

Her body was jerked around in the crush. She didn’t try to fight it. Spun about and elbowed and stepped on, Lily simply waited for the return of her ability to think, the ability to fight away the dangerous emotions that had overtaken her, many of which weren’t even her own, but that she’d adopted in the drama and pain she’d witnessed smearing off the boys upstairs. After several minutes, she reached the eye of the storm. The center of the dance floor. The place where all the bodies converged and swelled, and she was right in the middle of it.

Lily bent over at the waist, filling up the small void of personal space she’d been allowed, and screamed. It was a full-on, wrenched from deep in her soul, scream of rage and confusion and agony. It hurt her throat to match what she felt inside. No one heard her. The music was too loud. She kept on screaming.

Several songs later, Lily was hoarse and scrambling to escape the mob. She’d regained her bearings, become tethered to herself once more. She was still self-conscious and smarting from the less than flattering realizations of the night, but she remembered who she was again: a girl who, despite her failings, did mean for the best.

She shouldn’t have left her friends for so long, because none of them were upstairs when she checked. Even Strongpike had cleared out. Lily half expected that they’d returned to school already but doubted that Will would abandon her in the middle of muggle Glasgow.

The next place to look was outside, so Lily reversed and trudged downstairs, out the door, and into the street. The night had robbed the air of all vestiges of spring warmth. Lily rearranged the dress she still carried, so that the wet fabric didn’t rub against her skin. Her friends were nowhere in sight. Lily slid down, back to brick and bum to sidewalk, to wait. It was time likes these that she loved being a witch because Lily felt no fear in closing her eyes, confident that she could make any bloke who bothered her regret coming out for the night.

Several minutes passed before Lily heard footsteps, then felt the air shift as someone dropped into place beside her. Sirius, eyes rimmed red from either crying or the drink. Neither would have surprised her.
“Where are the others?” Lily asked through the grate of her throat.

“Went for pizza and tea. Said I need to sober up before we head back,” Sirius said.

“You look tired,” Lily commented.

Sirius nodded. “I could fall asleep any minute. Is that alright? If I lay my head on your shoulder, I mean? I don’t want to touch you if –”

“No, it’s fine,” Lily agreed.

There was nothing threatening about this sleepy, heartbroken Sirius, and she let him snuggle in close to rest. Idly, she ran her fingers through his silky hair, far softer and better tended than her own.

“You worry me when you get like that,” Lily told him. “And worse, you worry James and Remus. I don’t know what’s going on with you, but you need to find a way to channel your emotions without lashing out like that or crying away in the Room of Requirement. It’s not healthy.”

“I know,” Sirius mumbled. “I know. They don’t deserve that, especially James. I’m trash and nothing but.”

“Feeling sorry for yourself does no good,” Lily warned.

“No. I am trash. Everyone with sense has always seen it. Prongs and Moony are just too good to recognize the obvious. My parents could tell I was worthless from the day I was born. That’s what mum always used to say. Looked down, and she could just tell. Didn’t feel a thing when they handed me to her the first time. She could tell I wasn’t a real Black,” Sirius said.

“And thank God for that. I’ve had the horror of hearing your mum nearly every morning for breakfast, and she’s a nightmare, Sirius. You don’t want a thing to do with her,” Lily said.

“And thank God for that. I’ve had the horror of hearing your mum nearly every morning for breakfast, and she’s a nightmare, Sirius. You don’t want a thing to do with her,” Lily said.

“She was the nice parent…would you believe that?” Sirius asked. “Yeah, she’d throw a vase at my head if I got in her way, but she had pretty bad aim. With my father…I honestly didn’t think I’d make it to seventeen. My whole life, I thought he’d kill me long before I could make it here. I thought my time would be short, so make as many memories, have as much fun with James and Pete and Remus as possible before he ended me for good. You know what’s really sick? When I was like, twelve, I thought I was really lucky, too. Here, I had the best mates a bloke could ever ask for, and so what if Father shattered my leg or threw a few unforgivable around the house? I was born to die, so I ought to just feel grateful that I got a few months at school to be happy.”

“You didn’t deserve that. It’s not fair,” Lily whispered.

“Maybe I did deserve it. Maybe they saw something in me. Because what kind of monster treats his friends like I do?”

“I think you’ve had a…volatile few months, but I’ve watched you for years. You’re normally a wonderful friend to your mates. I’ve seen it. You’ve just been in a funk since the Christmas holiday.”

“There’s no excuse,” Sirius croaked. “You don’t understand. James saved me. I’d be nothing, no one, without him, and I just forget all about everything I owe him when something doesn’t go my way. I was shapeless when I came to Hogwarts, a gaping hole instead of a person. So much of my personality and belief system was unformed. I think if I’d fallen in with someone else, if I’d been sorted into Slytherin and befriended Mulciber and his lot, that I really could have become the monster my parents craved. The first person who genuinely cared about me, I was going to follow them anywhere.”
“And that person was James.”

“We met on the train ride. He was everything I wanted to be that day. He was ridiculously funny, confident in everything. No one’s opinion could slow him down. He assumed that people admired him until proven otherwise. And, he had a million and one ideas about everything. Name any topic – from something straightforward like Quidditch to something he barely knew about like fishing rights off coastal Japan – and he had an opinion he would blather on about. The complete opposite of my house where we were encouraged to never have an opinion on anything. And he always had ideas about what to do as well! These wild ideas! And once I had the freedom and the inspiration, I started to as well. I started to have opinions on things around the world. Not even the same as James because he’d never demand we be the same. Just my own opinions. The first thing that was ever mine. And I started to talk and laugh and live. He filled up part of that hole in me, and then I did the rest on my own because he made me strong.”

“You love him,” Lily said.

Sirius sat up so that he could look her squarely in the eye. It had been easier to reveal his emotional scars while staring at the kabob shop across the street, but he was already split open now. There was nowhere left to hide.

“More than anyone,” Sirius said. “And tonight, I stomped all over him. Maybe I’m not what Father always said I was. Maybe I’ve become him.”

Lily shook her head. “He’s dead, Sirius.”

“And I’m glad,” Sirius said, snapping forward with bared teeth.

Lily ran tender hands through his hair, skimming his cheeks and neck. Shaped by a childhood of abuse, Sirius didn’t know how to compose himself when the feelings became too much. Since he didn’t, Lily would anchor him. Willing him to feel what she felt – calm and compassion – Lily stroked him, until his eyes grew heavy and fluttered shut.

“You’re not your father,” she cooed. “You’re not. You were cruel to James today, so tomorrow, you’ll apologize and promise to do better. That’s how life works. Sometimes…well, to be honest, right now, I don’t much like myself either. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to give up on myself. No, not at all. It means, I’m going to start tomorrow with a new perspective, and I’m going to work that much harder to be a person I like.”

Sirius hummed something unintelligible, and Lily pulled his head to her breast. He lay there like a child, drawing comfort from her warmth and, bit by bit, giving into the call of sleep. In place of a lullaby, Lily continued to make promises about tomorrow and all the wonderful ways they were going to improve as people.

Thinking he’d long fallen asleep, Sirius surprised her when he murmured out her name.

“Yes?” Lily whispered back.

“Lily, I think I…you’re…I think I might…”

He didn’t quite finish the last word, trailing off into a grunting snore instead. Lily sat frozen on the sidewalk with the beautiful broken boy who wasn’t supposed to care curled into her side. Everything was a mess, and it was a hell of her own making. She ought to have felt destroyed. But, she’d managed to entrance even herself with her speech about starting anew, and Lily didn’t lose herself to panic. Instead, she sifted through Sirius’s hair and looked up at the stars.
Everything would work itself out. Tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

So bit of a service announcement. Of late, I’ve been feeling pretty worried about a few strands of plot in this story, worried that I’m writing myself into a corner with the mystery element. The plus side of serialized fanfic is getting to hear from you guys and getting that validation once a month. The down side is that it doesn’t leave me room to go back and layer in certain clues or move pieces as needed to make the final product work.

With that in mind, I’ve decided that I’m going to put updates on a hiatus moving forward until I feel that I’m in a better place plot wise. I won’t be editing past chapters, but this will allow me to move around plot elements in other chapters as needed while I work towards what I HOPE will be a satisfying ending.

I promise that I’m not abandoning the story all together. In fact, I have several additional chapters written out, so that would just be wasted work. Not having to worry about the updates will let me pace this more reasonably though, and I think will make the story stronger on the whole.

So like…yeah 😞 I’m bummed that this is necessary, but the stress of trying to balance the different elements has made this a chore rather than fun, which just isn’t worth it.

In the meantime, if anyone desperately misses me (wishful thinking, yes), you can always drop a one-shot prompt in a review or PM, and I’ll definitely consider it.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone (if anyone is even still here & interested) back with a new chapter after a few months' break. I'm not sure if I resolved all my problems with the ongoing mystery, BUT I've missed this story and finished up a few chapters, so figured...let's jump back in.

I can't promise I'm permanently returning to my once a month schedule. But I will vow to share Chapter 15 at least in April.

If anyone is still interested in this story, Thank You!! And I would love to hear what you think.

N.E.W.T.: four innocent letters transformed into anything but. The castle shook under the combined energy of dozens of students casting spells and feverishly murmuring incantations into the dead of the night. It was the seventh-year’s Goliath.

Tempers were frayed to the breaking point, and it was a common to sight a seventh-year berating a child who dared breathe too loudly in the library, and that was when they had the generosity not to just chuck the kid out altogether. Library real estate was priceless.

The fifth-years, meanwhile, had become their goonish lackeys. OWLs may have been simpler, but most students took twice as many. And, so the OWL students would lean on the seventh-years to harangue any sixth-year who made the mistake of looking too happy near a student in a test year. Sandwiched in the middle, the sixth-years feigned smugness, but there was an undercurrent of wariness; they were looking into a crystal ball, straight into their future, and no one liked what they saw.

There were the odd exceptions to the rule. Even as Cheryl O’Hannigan revised late into the night, eroding her normal amiability until she was a pale-faced zombie with freckles, Michaela Curtis remained unaffected. She went to sleep at a reasonable hour, took luxurious half-hour showers, and laughed like her future was already decided. Once upon a time, Snape would have sneered to Lily that the world needed ditch-diggers, too. Now, she just imagined the condescending voice every time Michaela rolled out of bed late.

Thankfully, it was almost over. Tuesday morning and the first exam had arrived. They only had to survive until Friday, and then, the train would be there to whisk them home to their families for a Saturday afternoon reunion.

It was also the day of Lily’s Potions final. The pressure was nowhere near as stifling for a mere exam, but Mei-Lin still took their final seriously. Sitting at breakfast that morning, she poured over her Potions tome, scribbling last minute notes into the margins already crowded by lazy doodles. Periodically, she’d look up at Lily with a question about technique or an ingredient’s origin. It was one of the only exams Lily didn’t need to study for, but she had nothing better to do, so she looked over her own notes as well.

Lily’s group date had changed her. The words she’d cooed to Sirius, promising new opportunities to
be good and kind and wholesome in the future had been just as true for her. She’d woken up the next morning in her own bed with a purpose: she was not going to play the same games with Sirius as a seventh-year. There were other ways to find the same information, ways that didn’t make her scrub frantically in the shower as if she could dust away the shame and dirt of her lies. She was going to break up with him.

Problematically, everyone appeared to have returned from the group date with their own resolutions. Both James and Sirius were ignoring her—or, well, not ignoring her exactly, it wasn’t as deliberate as that, but they had easily excised her from their lives. Sirius didn’t have the time for Lily as he threw himself wholeheartedly into making things up to his mates. His every waking minute was dedicated to making Remus smile or James laugh. Sometimes after he succeeded, Lily would catch him closing his eyes in relief. Lily felt proud at the progress Sirius was making, and he smiled more in those last weeks than she’d seen throughout the many months of their relationship.

James’ lack of attention stung worse, of course. If they were walking in the same direction after classes, he’d still chat with her or he’d share a casual joke during dinner, but he didn’t seek her out. Their conversation was shallow, like she was…just anybody. One of the many who crowded to be near him, if only for the temporary glow of feeling special, unmindful that they were anything but.

The only exception was Emmeline. James made time for Emmeline, and Lily tried to pretend she wasn’t burning to ash with jealousy.

That morning found James at breakfast with his fellow sixth-years, but down the table with Mary. Lily snuck glances at his profile whenever he wasn’t looking. He too had his Potions textbook spread open on the table, but he only flicked through the pages casually. Only the OWL exams had reduced James to the same frenzied, revising creature as his classmates. His end of term exams didn’t warrant the same dedication.

“Lily, I don’t understand the Zygmunt Budge edition of the Boil Cure potion. If it works perfectly fine with four ingredients, why bother with the flobberworm mucus?” Mei-Lin asked, pointing to the page she was reading.

Lily launched into an explanation about the properties flobberworm mucus strengthened, while Mei-Lin took notes. In the ensuing quiet, after she’d finished and Mei-Lin was still writing, Lily caught the line of Mary and James’ conversation.

“It’s sad to watch them all fall over themselves revising,” James said, nodding his head, like he was agreeing with something Mary had already said.

“I’m glad we never have to worry about that. I hate revision. Next year, I’m taking advantage and gliding through,” Mary said.

“See, I hate that,” James said. “I actually like to learn. And, I’m not saying the NEWT exams aren’t flawed or anything, but it still seems worthwhile to take them seriously and ace them all on my own. Besides, it’s not fair to everyone else.”

“You’re a secret swot,” Mary said.

“Take it to your grave, MacDonald.”

Mei-Lin shoved her notes in Lily’s face with a desperate plea for help, and Lily refocused on the matter at hand. They needn’t have worried so much. Four hours later, their Potions exam was long over, and Mei-Lin could breathe again. They’d both done fine. The most challenging part of the exam had been brewing a level-six potion from memory, and Lily had spied Mei-Lin’s boil cure
potion before she turned it in, the perfect shade of lilac, meaning she’d even incorporated the flobberworm mucus.

Once they’d been released back into the world, Mei-Lin had run directly for the comfort of her bed and a five-hour nap, a length which Lily could barely fathom. Somehow, Mei-Lin would still be tired enough to sleep eight hours that night as well. Lily, of course, didn’t take a break but instead dove straight back into her work.

The Charms OWL was scheduled for 1pm in the Great Hall, so Lily waited outside the double doors, catching passing fifth-years and coercing them into giving her an interview on their pre-OWL jitters, their study habits, hopes for the future, anything that could help flesh out the article Dorcas had saddled her with. Charms was the most popular subject to take for an OWL because it was infinitely useful outside of school, the professor didn’t switch every damn year, and Flitwick only assigned homework once a week.

The interviews flowed smoothly. There was no interesting angle to approach these exams, so Lily knew exactly the answers she sought, and, like they were reading from a script, so too did the students she interviewed. Lois Gardner told Lily how she was most looking forward to sleeping through the night again; she was only managing five hours a night, and those were tormented by dreams wherein she didn’t recognize a single question on the exam, and why didn’t anyone tell her the OWLs were presented in Gobbledygook? Tobias Bare gave her the standard quote about nerves and wishing he’d worked harder throughout the year, a cautionary tale for the fourth-years who would read the article. And, Ezekiel Burke played up the importance of the OWL exams for his future at the Ministry.

It was so easy to picture the article she’d present to Dorcas that Lily decided to put pen to paper there and then. The doors were sealed shut, the exams begun, and Lily sat on the floor outside the Great Hall, back propped against the wall and hastily jotting down the opening lines to her article. The foyer was empty, and despite the fifty-plus students just on the other side of the door, the only sound was the scratch of her quill.

She could remember the restrictive quiet of her own OWL exams. During the practical portion, the room was alive with sound and magic, but the written portion was oppressive, like a single cough or rustle of clothing would bring the Ministry officials down upon you. It made you want to apologize for writing too loudly. And yet, Lily had felt alive as answers flowed from quill to parchment, her mind awake and brimming with knowledge. She would stomach any number of sleepless nights if it meant she could tap into that feeling again.

Lost to the throws of inspiration, Lily didn’t notice at first when the quiet was disturbed. It started softly enough, just the flurry of something soft rubbing together. Then, the same sound amplified. It wasn’t long after that the shouting started, the screams for order and the shrieks of elation. Lily drew herself up to her feet, concerned because it was difficult to make out which side – joy or fury – was louder in the Great Hall, wondering if she ought to fetch help.

The decision was made for her when a minute later, the doors to the Great Hall were thrown open, and students poured out. At the back of the line of gabbing and smiling faces stood the Ministry officials who oversaw the exams. They were gesticulating wildly and forcing the lagging students out the door. Many students were clutching balled up parchment in their fists, which they guarded covetously. Whenever a Ministry official saw a student with one such piece of parchment, they’d descend, wrenching it away from the student and burning it to a crisp on the spot.

Now that the doors were open, Lily could spot out the source of the fluttering, a sound so familiar she should have recognized it immediately. Owls. Not the exams but the bird. There were nearly a
hundred owls swooping through the magicked sky of the Great Hall, hooting at the pleasure of greeting night sky when it ought to have been early afternoon.

“What happened?” Lily asked, pulling Gale Fawley, a Ravenclaw, out of the press of exiting students.

Gale’s shoulders were bouncing to an imaginary beat, excitement streaming out of her. “You’ll never believe it! One second, I’m just dying over a question on density charms, hadn’t a clue, and then, a second later, the owls arrived. This barn owl swoops right over me and drops a letter. Naturally, I read it, and ready for this? It’s the answers! The answers to the whole exam!”

“That’s not possible,” Lily said.

The questions on the OWL and NEWT exams changed every year. Responsibility for the makeup of the test sat with the Ministry’s Department of Magical Education, and they were as secretive as Unspeakables in the months they spent planning the exams. No one could have gotten so much as a peek at the exam before test day, let alone the access needed to make copies.

“Look, I have one right here,” Gale said, pulling the test out of her bra, where she’d wisely hidden it from the Ministry officials.

Lily greedily eyed the parchment where, sure enough, the answers to an entire Charms exam were inscribed. Her eyes darted straight to the answer on density charms, the one that had evaded Gale minutes before. It was written in block-style, like it had been written out with a typewriter, though a forgery charm was the more likely culprit, so there were no hints to be gleaned from the handwriting. Whoever had gained access to the answers could have sold them to one of the old families for an untold fortune, and yet, the perpetrator had chosen to release the answers as freely as if they were the Dumbledore chocolate frog card.

“Do you mind if I keep this?” Lily asked Gale, eyes glued to the evidence of an unbelievable mystery.

“Um, no offense, Evans, but not for all the galleons in Gringotts,” Gale said.

The incredible clue was ripped from Lily’s hands and disappeared into the crowd of exiting students. Mind racing, Lily narrowed in on the two likeliest scenarios. First, Voldemort had stolen the answers to the exam with the intention of disrupting yet another magical institution, weakening their society. It seemed petty, but he certainly had the means to gather the answers. Second, the Grindylows had struck in the boldest display of her Hogwarts’ career.

A concerned friend may have worried that Lily was obsessed, had they heard her suspicions. There was no way the Grindylows possessed the resources to manage such a feat. They were just a club of school children. Yet, Lily had noticed on Gale’s cheat sheet something other than answers. The culprits had added a winking smiley face in place of a signature. The teasing wink, the deviancy, the joyful execution, all of it reminded her of the Marauders. Take the Marauders’ panache for school disrupting pranks and add in the organization of the Grindylows, and Lily was afraid to speculate as to what all they could get up to.

There was no time to explore the mystery that day or the day after because Wednesday brought the dreaded Transfiguration and DADA final exams. Mei-Lin had taken on the personal responsibility of guaranteeing Lily passed all her classes and was quick to intervene at any moment Lily was distracted by some more interesting pastime. Mei-Lin could spot the glint in Lily’s eyes when her mind drifted to the OWL-owl incident, and she’d slap Lily smartly on the knuckles, which reminded Lily so much of her dreaded primary teachers that she’d refocus on animal transfigurations
Wednesday also brought the furor of a Gryffindor birthday as Marlene finally turned seventeen. Seven AM saw Marlene, flushed and smiling in the center of their dormitory, as her friends circled around her, wailing their congratulations. Lily stuffed her head beneath her pillow and groaned at the clamor. Even Mary was effusive. Emmeline and Mary hooked hands and danced around Marlene in a tight ring-around-the-rosie, peals of Marlene’s laughter penetrating Lily’s pillow barrier. Later, making her way to the loo, Lily listened to the crinkle of wrapping paper beneath her slippers as Marlene tore through her presents in a fever.

As it happened, Marlene was not the last of the Gryffindor sixth-years to turn seventeen. Mary’s birthday was later in the year. One day later, so Thursday brought the exact same ritual, only this time Mary stood in the center, half-smiling in indulgence at her cheery friends. Something about the double birthdays demanded intensity, so Marlene spread out the good wishes throughout both days. They acted like that Thursday was both of their birthdays, and even finals couldn’t compete with their enthusiasm.

Lily lay in bed on Thursday evening, frantically revising for her Divination and Astronomy finals; she had both classes’ textbooks open and would read a page of Astronomy, then turn her head to the left to read one page of Divination. It staved off the boredom that crept through whenever she was forced to read something against her will, the itch behind her eyelids that reminded her that the words would still be there on the page if she were to take just a short break to stare out the window. Her bedcurtains were open, so Lily saw when Emmeline entered the dormitory and when, instead of approaching her own bed, she headed straight for Lily.

“Hi, Em, alright?” Lily said, relieved to rest her eyes on something other than black and white script for a change.

“We’re going to celebrate the birthdays in the common room. We got a cake,” Emmeline said.

“Oh, that’s sweet of you,” Lily said. When Emmeline continued to stand there, Lily sat up and said, “And…?”

Emmeline laughed. “Merlin, Lily. And, that’s my way of inviting you to come join us. You and Mei-Lin both.”

From her bed, in much the same position as Lily, Mei-Lin spoke up, “What? Come sing Happy Birthday to Mary and Marlene?”

“Yeah, we could all use a break from thinking about exams,” Emmeline said.

Lily agreed immediately, though she half-wondered if it wasn’t just her worst instincts luring her away from responsibility. She bound up from the bed. She was dressed up top in a jumper, though her bra had been shucked to the side the moment she entered the safety of the dormitory, and she’d opted for pajama pants below. They were loose and silver with the faintest hint of glitter, so Lily felt like a disco ball in dim lighting. She dug through a pile of dirty laundry at the foot of her bed in search of a pair of jeans, rejecting the first several pairs as too tight or uncomfortable after her silky sleep pants, before ultimately deciding nothing could compare. She’d just wear her pajama pants downstairs. In her opinion, it was unreasonable to ask a person to redress after seven pm.

Mei-Lin had yet to move from her bed. Wearily, she said, “Didn’t we wish Marlene a happy birthday literally yesterday? It’s over.”

“Yeah, but it’s fun,” Emmeline said.
“Yeah, but it’s final exams time! How can you ask us to risk our marks for a second happy birthday, no matter how fun?” Mei-Lin said.

Emmeline made a disgusted noise in her throat. “I’m not going to beg either of you to come down. It would have been a nice thing to do for your friends, Marlene especially, but if you can’t be bothered…”

“Marlene and I aren’t friends!” Mei-Lin snapped.

It was a slight too many for Emmeline, who turned cranberry red and marched right out of the dormitory without a backward glance. Lily gave Mei-Lin a hurried warning to be kind before racing out the door after Emmeline. Somehow, she’d been lumped in with Mei-Lin’s orneriness, and it bothered her that Emmeline didn’t make a distinction. Lily wouldn’t call herself the friend of any of her other dormmates, but that wasn’t because she didn’t want to be. She just didn’t know how to be friends with a girl like Marlene. Once, she’d thought she knew how to be friends with Emmeline, but Emmeline had ground that hope underfoot and never looked back. When Emmeline noticed Lily’s footsteps following her, she paused to give Lily a chance to catch up, and they walked down the staircase together.

“Sorry about Mei-Lin. She gets cross before her exams. Not sure why as her marks are always fine, but you know. People go a bit mad,” Lily apologized.

“It’s nice of you to lie, Lily, but we both know the truth,” Emmeline said in a quiet voice. “Mei-Lin is judgmental and mean and hates Marlene for no good reason. Only Marlene’s too sweet to notice when someone’s spitting on her, so she thinks they’re right chums.”

“She doesn’t hate Marlene,” Lily said, shifting uncomfortably at the harsh assessment. She couldn’t say for sure whether Emmeline was being unfair, and it made her uncomfortable.

“Again, Lily, it’s nice of you to lie,” Emmeline said, giving Lily a bracing pat on the shoulder, which Lily interpreted as a signal to drop the subject before they entered the common room and the celebration downstairs.

Stepping out from the stairwell, Lily was surprised by what she saw. She’d been expecting an enormous bash, overflowing with Marlene’s many friends, but there didn’t appear to be a party at all. Mary and Marlene were sitting on the floor, on opposite sides of a low-seated coffee table with a one-tier vanilla cake on top. There were a few of the Gryffindor seventh-year girls there – Annie Powell and Peggy Lane – but not all of them, like Lily would have assumed, and there were hardly any boys there at all. Just Remus with his arm slung around Will’s shoulders, and Peter standing behind their armchair, snickering at a joke Remus had made.

Politely, as Petunia had raised her right, Lily went straight to Mary and Marlene to wish them congratulations on finally making it to seventeen like the rest of them. Marlene flung her arms around Lily. The hug lasted oddly long, but it was nice to be touched by a person. Before dating Sirius, Lily had been touch-starved, longing for someone to wrap an arm around her waist and breaking into full-body shivers whenever someone brushed by her in the hall. Marlene smelled like chocolate and whiskey, and Lily gently shifted away in case Marlene was about to pass out in her arms.

Marlene looked lucid enough when Lily got a good look at her. She was pink in the cheeks and sported a costume tiara upon her head. Similarly decorated, someone had tossed a hot pink boa around Mary’s shoulders, or so Lily assumed, as she couldn’t picture Mary donning the silly thing herself.

“I like your tiara,” Lily said. “You know, the George IV State Diadem worn by the muggle queen
has over 1,300 diamonds? I think it’s 1,333 exact, but don’t quote me on it. They had it made for only a few thousand pounds, though with inflation it would be more like several hundred thousand, but still.”

Pointing proudly to her shiny tiara, Marlene said, “Well, this one cost three sickles.”

“Two,” Emmeline corrected, coming up to prop an elbow on Marlene’s diminutive shoulder, “And not a diamond to be seen.”

“Still! It was a great present. I love it,” Marlene said appreciatively.

While they were talking, a few stragglers joined their little party. Sirius was one of them. Lily caught James out of the corner of her eye, turning instinctively, like she meant to follow him, but he bounded up the stairs, leaving the party behind. Her heart, hormones, and feet all begged to chase after him, but she stayed rooted in place.

“So, this is a smaller party than I would have expected,” Lily commented to Marlene.

“Well, I could hardly invite everyone tonight. We only have one cake. I figured tonight I’d limit just to my closest friends, and tomorrow we’ll have the real party,” Marlene explained.

Lily was floored by the implication that she counted among Marlene’s closest friends, and a spring of fondness for Marlene welled up within her. So she was gossipy and didn’t care for science, what did that matter? She was quick to smile and quicker to share, and all of her friends clearly adored her. Lily wondered why it took her so long to realize.

“You’re having a party tomorrow night, too?” Lily asked.

“You know the party. It –”

“Marlene!” Emmeline cut her off in a hushed reprimand. “Maybe she wasn’t invited!”

That shut Marlene up, who immediately mumbled an apology, half to Emmeline for the breach of secrecy and half in pity to Lily. It didn’t take a genius to figure that there was another Grindylows party on the horizon. It might have been an end of term celebration, a last hurrah before they packed themselves off onto the Hogwarts Express, hungover and bleary-eyed Saturday morning. Another Grindylows party falling around a popular student’s birthday struck Lily as a hard to swallow coincidence, though, and she looked over at Mary – beautiful, inaccessible and therefore cool, Mary, who had never participated in a school activity or tried in a class, and yet never been classified as less than intelligent.

Mary stood away from their little gathering, half-ensconced in the stairwell with Sirius leaning over her. He’d pressed his arms into the walls, boxing her in, though Mary didn’t look like she wanted to escape. Not a centimeter of them was touching, but they were intimately locked together all the same, every breath of motion teased the possibility of contact.

“Oh, Lily that’s...” Marlene caught the line of Lily’s stare and stuttered through a few meaningless, mumbled words. Unable to force anything more concrete out, Marlene took advantage of the slicing of the cake to flit away.

Unlike Marlene, Emmeline didn’t run away at the first sign of tension. She rubbed consolingly at Lily’s arm, bringing the fine hairs straight to attention. “I’m sorry, Lily. I know how that feels.”

“You what?” Lily asked.
“You know what I mean, Lily.”

“No, I don’t. You know how it feels?”

Emmeline’s grip on her arm grew bracing, the signal of bad news to come, “Oh, Lily…I wasn’t going to say anything because, well, we all knew, but they weren’t doing anything. So long as they kept their distance, I figured there was no harm in it but…Lily, they’re mad about each other. Even still. Whenever you’re not in the room, he stares at her. He’s always asking us about how she’s doing…to be honest, I half thought he only started up with you to make her jealous in the first place.”

Lily’s mouth turned down at the corners as she considered whether she was at all surprised by this. The timeline for their relationship hadn’t left much time for getting over Mary, so Lily had assumed he still pined after her in some part of his heart. The jealousy angle was news to her though, and she questioned whether it fit his behavior. Sirius had never rubbed Lily in Mary’s face like one might expect of such a scheme, so Lily wasn’t sure she bought it. Regardless, she’d known from the start what Emmeline’s bad news would be, and her question as to what Emmeline meant had less to do with Sirius and Mary and more to do with Emmeline herself.

“No, you misunderstand. You said you understood what it felt like, and I meant, when have you felt that? You’ve only dated, what two blokes, and neither of them went running back to their ex-girlfriends…or, did something happen to you over the summer I don’t know about?” Lily asked.

Lily hadn’t meant her observation as an attack, was just stating the obvious. They hadn’t spoken all that much outside of classes that year, so if Emmeline had suffered a secret heartbreak, it had occurred on the margins of Lily’s vision. Tonight, Emmeline had been warm again, and Lily wanted to reenter the sunny circle she emitted. She wanted to know everything she had missed in the long year that Emmeline shut her out. She wanted to be friends, not only with Emmeline, but Marlene, too.

At Lily’s blundering question, Emmeline drew in a sharp breath, the force of it straightening her posture into something steely. “Unbelievable, Lily. I swear, sometimes…”

“What?” Lily asked desperately, distinguishing that this wasn’t light ribbing but disgust peppering Emmeline’s voice. “Emmeline, what?”

“Unbelievable.”

It was the last thing Emmeline said before abandoning Lily, confused and mouth flapping like a guppy as she tried to process her mistake. Lily stuck around for a few minutes, through the cutting of the cake. Emmeline and Mary both shoved a piece into Marlene’s face and guffawed at the sight she made with her blonde eyebrows bleached to nothing with white frosting. While they were busy laughing, Sirius tiptoed up behind Mary and returned the favor, getting her solidly in the chin. Everyone laughed and laughed. Everyone except Lily. Over the last several months, she’d felt like a member of Gryffindor house for the first time, a true friend and part of the golden group that she’d watched for six plus years, never envious and yet never fully at ease in her role as Gryffindor apart. She watched her boyfriend fight off a fistful of cake from Mary, watched as Marlene and Emmeline looped affectionate arms, watched a laughter that made no room for her at all.

No, it had all been pretend.
Lily’s invitation to the Grindylows party arrived in the post the next morning. The school owl dropped the invitation but didn’t stick around waiting for her to open it. All of the owls and students steered clear from Lily’s end of the table at breakfast time. Everyone was driven away from the guaranteed banshee-screeching that accompanied Lily’s daily howler delivery. To an outside observer, it looked Lily had the plague, the far end of the table where she sat was utterly deserted, at least ten seat-lengths left between her and the nearest students, clustered top-heavy in preparation for the onslaught.

Being a dear friend, Mei-Lin would still sit with Lily during breakfast, but she always took a walk when the owls arrived, circling the professors’ table a few times before returning after Walburga or Bellatrix, depending, had exhausted their lungs and the howler had burst into flames. When Sirius was still acknowledging their relationship, he’d sit with Lily, bringing along his mates. The sound of his incensed family put a new pep into Sirius’s step, and he eagerly awaited the chance to mock his mother’s histrionics or Bellatrix’s grotesque turn of phrase. His friends would sit stonily silent throughout, much like Lily herself.

Her howler, another from Walburga, was mid-wail when the Grindylows invitation arrived. The howler hovered in the air a little to Lily’s left, belting curses and threats that didn’t land when Lily was so invested in pouring the perfect portion of marmalade onto her toast. The greatest perk of her daily howlers was that it gave her unattested control over one of the marmalade jugs, and Lily was growing plump on her hearty breakfasts.

She’d also made great friends with the Black’s family owl, a majestic tawny with a taste for sausage. The Blacks had been remiss in their training because Herbert – Lily’s decided name for the owl – couldn’t tell the mud in her blood any more than it could distinguish between the letters of the alphabet. Lily absentely fed the pretty bird a few pieces of bacon off her own plate for which she was rewarded with a view of Herbert’s folded wings, a request for her to gently pet his feathers.

The Grindylow invitation stole her attention away from Herbert and even her beloved marmalade. Leaving their guests little time, the party was to be held that evening after curfew. Attendees were instructed to arrive at the Trophy Room in groups of two over the course of the hour. Specifically, Lily had been ordered to arrive at 9:25pm precisely. Cramming a party full of students into the Trophy Room was an impossibility, so Lily figured it was a stopping point to convalesce before they reached their real destination.

From the Hufflepuff table, Will came bounding over, a letter stuffed in his clumsy fist.

“Morning, Lily,” Will screamed to be heard over Walburga.

“Morning,” Lily said. She didn’t scream but rather enunciated clearly, having found that no one had the lungs to outdo the Black matriarch in sound and that lip reading was essential.

“I...tion…”

Lily missed the entirety of whatever Will said next, so she cupped a hand to her ear as a signal. Instead of repeating himself, Will shoved his letter in front of Lily’s nose. The letters jumbled together up close. Lily pulled back a bit, and they reordered themselves into something meaningful: Will’s own invitation to the Grindylows.

Shouting in her triumph, Lily said, “It’s Remus! I knew it!”

Timed as if Walburga was a prophet, the howler ceased just as Lily let out this exclamation and half the heads at Gryffindor table turned to stare at her. Lily’s eyes widened, and she looked helplessly to Will, who swooped in to save her from the suspicious outburst.
“That I fancy him? You and everyone else, Lily!” Will said loudly.

With a scrape of silverware, everyone returned to their previous conversations. The chatter of students sounded eerily quiet after the din of the howler, and Lily couldn’t help but lower her voice to a half-whisper.

“Brilliant thinking there, Will. I totally knew Remus was a member of the Grindylows, too. I mean, that has to be what your invitation means, right?” Lily said. “He fancies you, and you’re suddenly invited for the first time? Please.”

“My thinking precisely,” Will seconded. There was a bit of ash from the howler on the seat in front of Lily. Daintily, Will brushed it aside with a cloth napkin before taking up a seat.

“I can’t believe you’ve bagged Lupin,” Lily said. “It makes no sense, of course, as Remus is very sweet and you’re so very unfancyboxable, but here we are.”

Fully expecting Will to lob a biscuit at her, Lily tensed up in her seat, but the assault never came. Will sighed and grew quiet, looking away down the table. Lily’s shoulders tensed again, this time out of worry. She had seen Will and Remus together the night before, seemingly fine, but there had been hours in between for everything to fall apart.

“How is it? Everything okay?” Lily asked.

Now, Will looked at her, and his mouth grew wide. “Everything’s just wonderful.”

He sighed again, and this time Lily interpreted his behavior differently. It was dreaminess, head in the clouds, can’t keep his heart out of his throat, basking in the joy of it, dreaminess. Lily knew how that felt, and she rubbed her neck to tamp down her own competing smile. The more she considered the trajectory of Will’s relationship with Remus, the more she saw parallels with her own. Lily was private about her emotions in general and doubly embarrassed to speak about her illicit crush, so her feelings for James were unspoken between the two friends, only acknowledged in brief bouts of teasing. The desire to share her feelings, to expose her vulnerable, nervous heart to anyone, even Will, was foreign to Lily, but she found herself nervously edging towards a revelation right there at the breakfast table.

“It’s marvelous isn’t it? Strange, too. You’ve been mooning after Remus for months now, and suddenly, he’s there,” Lily said.

“It’s very romantic,” Will agreed.

“Does it, well, um...does it make you nervous at all?” Lily asked. When Will expressed confusion, Lily forced herself to clarify, her tongue unfolding to produce a real sentence. “Just now that it’s all happening. You’ve liked Remus from afar this whole time, but that’s not really the same as knowing him. What if he turns out to be something other than what you were expecting? What if you don’t like that something? Or, what if you like it a lot, but he doesn’t like what he learns about you? What if the whole thing is just a big waste of time?”

“We’re only seventeen...I half expect things won’t work out, and I half expect we’re going to embark on the defining love affair of my life. That’s kind of what being our age is about, yeah? The big, full-hearted love of life and living. Maybe we don’t work out, but that doesn’t mean it’s a waste of time. I’ll have enjoyed myself until then,” Will said. He studied her face for a moment before adding, “Sweetheart, you look upset. Did you hear something about Remus that you’re scared to tell me?”
“Oh, no! Of course not!” Lily rushed to reassure him.

“Then, what’s the problem? I like everything I’ve learned about him so far. Maybe there’s a big scary monster in the closet, but I’m not going to freak out before I know,” Will said.

Scraped bare, Lily pushed her plate aside. All around them, the Great Hall was emptying out as students left for their final exams. It was the last day of term. Tomorrow morning, they’d be loaded up onto the Hogwarts Express and sent home, Lily to a summer of the mundane, while most of her classmates would keep magic close to their breasts. It made her jealous to picture James returning to his big house with a family that adored him for his best efforts and flashed their magic about as if it was as plentiful, as normal, as electricity.

It was like poking a tender wound, but Lily bit out, “It’s nothing to do with Remus exactly. I just...people are complicated, so complicated. You can’t just learn them the way you can learn about physics or Charms or Astronomy. Just when you think you’ve finally sorted someone, they turn around and do something entirely unexpected! Something hypocritical even! I don’t know how you can love someone if you don’t really know them, but I also don’t think you can ever know anyone but yourself. Not really. So right now, you think everything between you and Remus is wonderful, but what happens when you go home for the summer? Maybe he comes back in September, and he’s forgotten all about you! Maybe he’s found some other bloke or, worse, changed into someone you can’t recognize. And, you may think that’s not going to happen, but what do you really know about him or anyone else?”

“You’re sure worried about my relationship prospects,” Will said teasingly.

Lily blushed at the knowing tone. “Fine. I might be projecting a little bit.”

Historically, Lily had little success in understanding her classmates. There was Emmeline and her inexplicable distance that year. Mary and her odd appearances when Lily least expected her company. Sirius and his million mood swings. When it came to James Potter, Lily worried she understood him least of all. He always surprised her.

Summer loomed up as yet another obstacle to their relationship, ready to replace Sirius, who Lily fully intended to gently send Mary’s way sometime that afternoon, if she could only get him to slow down for a minute and talk to her. Lily was hoping for the big romantic moment with James, a kiss, a declaration, a promise for the coming term; but, James might surprise her like he always did. She was nervous, all but trembling, at the prospect of putting herself out there again, when James had so casually crushed her before.

“Lily Evans, are you finally going to go get your man?” Will asked, his mouth stretching wider than ever.

“If he’ll have me,” Lily admitted.

“I know people are hard for you, but they’re not confusing to me, Lily. Honest. People may change, but if there’s one thing I’m confident in, it’s that Potter’s only had eyes for you for a long time,” Will said.

At this, Lily finally allowed herself a smile, and Will chucked her encouragingly underneath the chin. Neither of them had final exams that morning and nowhere to be, and Lily felt the tension uncoil in her belly. If there was nowhere she need be, there was also nowhere she’d rather be than talking with Will. Lily stood up from the bench only to drop to her knees so that she could crawl beneath the Gryffindor table to the other side, next to her friend. Without hesitation, his arm flew up, so that Lily could tuck herself into the crevice of his side.
“You know, I’m proud of you,” Will murmured into her hair.

Lily didn’t say it out loud, but she fancied she was rather proud of herself as well.

At the specified hour, Lily made her way to the Trophy Room for the Grindylows end of year party. She paid extra attention to being prompt, knowing that this would be her last chance of the school year to gather evidence. Over the summer, she would do her best to follow various leads, but she was limited by her muggle existence in Cokeworth, where Petunia wouldn’t even let her drive the car across parish lines.

Lily had dressed smartly for the party in the only dress that still fit after a fifth-year growth spurt had rendered her every dress too short, too tight, too obscene for casual wear. The dress usually lay crumpled along the bottom of Lily’s trunk, forgotten as there was never any cause to wear it. Not quite formal wear, the skirt all the same stretched from the ribboned tie beneath her bust to right above her ankle. She and Petunia had sewed it together from a store-bought pattern over the summer. The experience had been predictably fraught as Petunia was a demanding taskmaster. Lily would become easily distracted at the sewing machine, missing as her lines veered off course. Petunia hadn’t trusted Lily to sew on any of the embroidery or the faux-silk of the collar, wrestling the material from Lily, who immediately wanted the responsibility back once Petunia deemed her unsuitable for it. There’d been lots of bickering over the fabric - buttercup yellow with a delicate green-flower pattern - and Lily had threatened to collapse in a faint at least four times during the hemming process as the heat of the summer bore down through the windows on her sunburnt neck. In retaliation, Petunia had stuck Lily with her pins several times.

Wearing the dress made Lily think of her sister. Petunia, who she would see tomorrow at the train station. Petunia, who was bossy and controlling and always insisted she could do a better job at everything. Petunia, who Lily had missed desperately.

The Grindylows . Entering, Lily was surprised to find she’d been paired with Sirius. After having avoided her for several days, Lily hadn’t anticipated he’d partner them together, and surely he had, as the Grindylows controlled the partners. He scanned her outfit, eyes critically lingering at the worn-down brown trainers, she’d had to pair with her dress for lack of any other options.

“Don’t judge me,” Lily said in lieu of a greeting. “None of the other girls share my shoe size, and I don’t own anything else.”

“Delicate feet, dearheart?” Sirius teased.

“Exactly,” Lily lied. What Sirius didn’t know was that Lily actually had enormous feet for her average height, wearing a woman’s size 41. Her feet were her only body part that piqued her self-consciousness, and Lily went to great lengths to never be barefoot in front of others. “So, are you going to show me the way to the party?”

“I don’t know where we’re going any more than you,” Sirius said, or rather, lied, as Lily didn’t doubt for a second that he knew exactly what the Grindylows had in store for them. “We’re just waiting for our guide, I suppose.”

They didn’t have to wait long. Gliding through the case housing the academic awards, the vague outline of the Fat Friar emerged. Lily froze up as the imprint of the dead man floated close to her, a stretch of her arm, and she could feel the absence of him where her eyes insisted he ought to be. Her shoulder blades clenched tight, and Lily fought to stay rooted in place, not to fall back behind the false security of Sirius’s frame or race from the room.
Ghosts were a step too far for Lily Evans. Gone was her usual curiosity about the metaphysical and boundaries of the world. From day one at Hogwarts, when Sir Nick had approached the first-years at the dinner table to say hello, Lily had refused to engage with the ghosts of Hogwarts. Back then, she’d turned pale and scrambled off to the loo before Sir Nick could get close. In the stall, she’d counted her harried breaths and repeated Petunia’s many-whispered promises that “Ghosts aren’t real, Lily. Honestly, stop being so silly,” like Petunia’s word counted for more than the evidence before Lily’s very eyes.

She’d been terrified of ghosts after her mum fell ill. Ghosts were dead, and death was awful. Case closed. Phantoms plagued her nightmares. Sometimes, they were strangers: ghosts of fallen soldiers or little girls around Lily’s age, girls who had been murdered and still bore the bloody wound that had ended their too-short lives. Other times, she dreamed of her mother as a ghost, never nefarious like the others, and yet so achingly sad, the worst possible outcome for Lily, who still held out hope that Mummy would make it, that Lily would wake up wet from tears and sweat. On those nights, which became more or less a daily occurrence throughout her eighth year of life, Petunia would throw open the covers on her narrow twin bed, inviting Lily to climb in alongside her. Petunia was knobby and sharp, where their mum was soft folds of fat to nestle into, but Petunia was the only substitute for a mother’s comfort that Lily would ever have, and she’d find peace sleeping in her sister’s bed.

“Hello there. A pair of Gryffindors, I see,” the Fat Friar greeted cheerfully, like his very existence wasn’t a grotesquerie.

“Good to see you, mate,” Sirius replied back with half the enthusiasm, which considering the opposite ends of the friendly spectrum these two beings occupied, meant Sirius was actually being overly peppy. “What’re you doing here?”

“I’m here to guide you to tonight’s soiree,” the Fat Friar explained.

The Grindylows’ reach extended to ghosts. Ghosts! Lily peered out from behind Sirius’s shoulder in disbelief, wondering what would induce an undead being to play butler to a living organization. It’s not like they could be bribed or blackmailed. They were dead!

“Lead the way,” Sirius said.

The Fat Friar extended a hand, like he expected someone to take it, and Sirius moved aside in a gentlemanly allowance for Lily to go first. Lily stared horrorstruck at the blue-tinged outline of a hand, what once had been flesh. By maintaining absolute vigilance, Lily had managed to never touch a ghost during her years at Hogwarts, no accidental brushes in the corridor, no rushing through a ghost while late to class. The limits of her bravery were tested as she lifted a shaking hand toward the ghost before her, preparing for what she imagined would be an icy rush of decay and absence.

Before their hands made contact, the Fat Friar swung his bulk around to the side, hand sweeping away to gesture at the wall of Trophies opposite him. Lily sagged in relief, Sirius’s body behind her catching the slack. There was a golden trophy shaped like a broomstick in flight. The Fat Friar instructed Sirius to tilt the broom stick’s left side downward. It was obviously the trigger to a secret passageway, so Lily wasn’t startled when the floor rumbled and a display case shifted to the side, revealing a trap door. Sirius hauled it open, so that Lily could see inside: a straight drop downward with a flimsy ladder to support their descent.

“Once you hit the bottom, head North. It should take you about ten minutes to reach the others,” the Fat Friar said.

Lily went first, eager to get well-away from the Fat Friar, and even preferring a grimy hole leading to
innumerable potential dangers to another minute in his company. It was only a short climb, and once she was at the bottom, Lily cast a Lumos to light their way. A thud signaled Sirius’s arrival. He was too cool to take the last legs of the ladder.

To her surprise, Sirius held her hand as they walked. They were used to physical contact at this point, so Lily settled comfortably into his grip. When all this was over, Lily hoped she could maintain a real friendship with Sirius, one where maybe they’d continue to share the casual affection they’d developed so seamlessly. It seemed a waste to sacrifice that comradery, and Lily didn’t see how a burgeoning relationship with James could work with Sirius as a stranger or, worse, enemy.

“I’m glad we were paired together,” Sirius said, squeezing her hand.

“Really?”

“We haven’t seen each other in ages it feels like,” Sirius said.

“Well, you’ve been busy with your friends,” Lily said.

Sirius nodded. “I took your advice seriously, Lily. I hate that…I hate myself sometimes, but never so much as when I’m hurting my mates. It’s like I leave my body, like I’m hovering just outside it and saying the worst things possible. It’s almost like part of me wants them to see me the way I do, hate me like I do, and so I push and push and push.”

Without the excuse of inebriation, Lily was surprised that Sirius was so candid with her. At the start of their relationship, getting him to say anything of substance – Grindylows related or not – had been like pulling teeth. Now, he volunteered information about himself without a second thought, like it was natural to treat Lily as confidant.

“Like I said before: all you can do is try to be better every day,” Lily said.

The ladder had released them in an underground tunnel. Everyone knew there were caverns beneath the school, but Lily had never explored them before, so her eyes darted this way and that as they walked. The walls of the tunnel were untouched by modern man, packed dirt that had survived the rains of Scotland for centuries. The dirt beneath their feet similarly substituted for a floor. No student could have asked for a more isolated place for a party, though they may have preferred less brown.

“And that’s what I’ve been trying to do,” Sirius said. “Do better. It’s why I’ve been so busy with James and Remus. I have a lot to make up to them.”

“I’m proud of you,” Lily said honestly.

The kiss took her by surprise. She almost stumbled over her feet when Sirius came to an abrupt stop and spun her into his body. Around a teeth-baring smile, Sirius kissed her, an odd clash of lips and teeth that wasn’t remotely erotic yet burst with unexpressed emotion. Lily froze up. She’d fully believed she and Sirius were on the same page about ending their relationship. But there were his cut-off words from the bar to consider. He’d started to say he loved something…someone before falling asleep on her shoulder, easy to pass off as meant for his friends in the moment, but now, when he was nuzzling her throat…

Because she was puzzling over his behavior, Lily didn’t react when Sirius closed his mouth to kiss her properly, or when he opened it to kiss her even more properly.

Her back hitting the wall broke the spell of dissociation. Sirius had his tongue in her mouth, his hands in her hair, and his pelvis pressed tightly against her stomach. Ending things with him wouldn’t be simple. Despite his remaining feelings for Mary and their cold spells, Sirius was invested
in a relationship with Lily that could barely survive a mild day in a lifeboat. Gently, Lily pressed her palm into his chest and pushed. He took the hint immediately, pulling back and smiling down at her.

Maybe it was guilt at the hurt she knew she would inflict soon or maybe pity, which compelled Lily to kiss him softly on the lips one last time, to take his hand and continue leading him down the corridor, like they were a real couple, and she’d only stopped things because they were expected at a party. Sirius was her humpty-dumpty boyfriend, and she wanted to put him back together again, not contribute a few more cracks for his considerable collection, so she would be as sweet as possible as she led him towards an unexpected breakup. She’d give him one more night.

The Grindylows had style and money, everything needed to throw the party of the year. Their location may have been an underground, dirt-filled tunnel, but that didn’t stop the Grindylows from renovating. The party proper was being held at the apex of several tunnels, a clearing nearly a quarter the length of a football field, and twice as wide, enough space that students felt cozy and unexposed without having to stand atop each other. Shag carpeting had been laid down, thick as a sleeping bag for students that wanted to sit or shuck off blistering heels. A chandelier of lighted candles floated above the partygoers, revealing the long buffet of food and drink that would put Honeydukes to shame: toffees, cakes, macaroons, puff pastries, ice cream floats, hot chocolate fountains, smores, pasties, and so much more lined up by color and representing every shade of the rainbow.

No student approached the white-clothed table of treats. They didn’t need to. In addition to decorating, the Grindylows had commissioned the house elves of Hogwarts to serve at their party. Every guest was assigned their own house elf to act as a valet and all a student needed to do was mention their craving for an oatmeal raisin cookie and an elf had already popped away to fetch it.

There was no shortage of entertainment either. Down one of the connected tunnels, partygoers mounted brooms and raced, two at a time, to prove who was the faster. Another tunnel hosted karaoke. Another tunnel for drinking games. Another tunnel for keg stands. Another for snogging. And at the center of all of it was Lily. She’d felt so isolated at Marlene’s birthday gathering, but a few drinks in, all of her inhibitions had gone. She’d made a beeline for Will when she first arrived, nearly knocking over the house elf, Lindy, that was trying to introduce herself and explain her day of indentured servitude to Lily – all attempts at rejecting this offer were taken as affrontery. Joining Will meant attracting Remus, who brought with him Sirius, Peter, James, and a host of others, so that Lily was nearly hoarse from having to shout over everyone talking at once.

Remus must have forgotten that he disliked her for running riot with his friends’ hearts because he and Peter were pressed close to her side as they chatted about their plans for the holidays. Unlike their spoiled and privileged mates, neither Remus nor Peter were looking forward to months of play in exotic locations. Peter would be expected to help out around his mother’s shop, and Remus would spend most of his summer months on school work and spending time with his parents. When Remus mentioned his mother, excited at the upcoming return of her son, Lily pressed her hand against his in quiet understanding. Lily pictured her in a white nightgown, emaciated, limp hair, illness personified. Remus was also surprisingly aware of muggle events – or as he modestly phrased it, ‘would flip through the paper occasionally’ – so they talked about Spain’s recent elections, their first democratic elections in 41 years, and the toppling of the Franco regime.

Everything felt warm and wonderful at the party. No matter where she turned, Lily saw people laughing or kissing. Emmeline and Marlene hadn’t unhooked elbows for nearly the whole party, keeping each other standing even as they both sacrificed balance to each additional sip of firewhiskey. Beside them, Mary looked on fondly, casting the necessary charms to keep them upright
when they weren’t looking. Will was engaged in a long conversation with the group’s house elves about the future and what they wished for their children, never objecting to their sycophantic responses but meeting them on their level. Cheryl O’Hannigan was dancing like the world was about to end, shedding all the woes of her NEWTs, while most of the seventh-years egged her on. Sirius and James were engaged in a mock duel, casting the world’s silliest spells at the other and guffawing as their noses grew, their hair fell out, their nostrils shrank – all with a counter-curse at the ready.

“So, I’m almost surprised you two came to this party,” Lily said to Remus and Peter. “I would have thought you hated the Grindylows.”

“Why would you think that?” Remus asked.

“I do,” Peter muttered under his breath.

Lily had already surmised that Peter wasn’t a member, so she didn’t dig deeper there. Instead, she focused on Remus. “Because they’ve stolen your schtick haven’t they? The OWLs prank? That’s going to go down as the best prank in the history of this school, and it won’t have your marauding signature on it.”

Remus shook out his sandy hair. “Nah. I’ve never cared about the attention or anything like that. I’ve just gone along with James and Sirius because I like spending time with them. It’s about the fun for us, not about the glory.”

“James Potter doesn’t like glory?” Lily challenged, thinking of him hefting the Quidditch Cup above his head and bellowing as he marched through the halls earlier that month.

“Well…you’ve got me there,’ Remus conceded. They giggled for a second at the joke, and then longer when they saw James, bewitched so that his hands wouldn’t stop clapping even as he fumbled to apply a countercharm.

It gave Lily an idea. “What’s your wand type, Remus? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“Cypress with unicorn hair,” Remus answered.

Lily’s eyebrows flew up to her hairline. “Oh! Did you get it from Ollivander? Did he tell you the thing?”

“You mean the one about death? Yeah,” Remus said.

“What thing about death?” Peter piped up.

Lily stayed quiet, letting Remus explain. Cypress wood was attracted to people with noble natures. Nobility went beyond bravery, adding in a sense of self-sacrifice and duty to the mix. In the books on wandlore that Lily had read, it was noted that Ollivander often greeted his cypress-paired customers with extra courtesy, telling them that they were due to die a noble and meaningful death.

“Scared my mother out of her wits,” Remus said with an affectionate roll of his eyes. “I was just a boy, and Ollivander was celebrating my demise. Not the best customer service.”

That caught Lily’s attention. “Oh…you got your wand when you were eleven? This same wand?”

“Yes,” Remus said in a queer tone of surprise.

Either Lily had misunderstood something significant about the wand rituals that the Grindylows partook in, or Remus wasn’t a member. He ought to have been a member. In Remus, Lily saw the
combination of everything the Grindylows celebrated: intellect, skill, and popularity. There was no explanation for why he would have been overlooked.

Mistaking Lily’s strange look for consternation at Remus’s supposed heroic death, he rushed to reassure her that these things were largely exaggerated. Plenty of cypress wandholders lived long lives, ended on a peaceful breath in bed. The cypress wand merely indicated the kind of personality willing to die nobly. Lily leaned into the excuse, agreeing that she was being silly and ignoring the way her stomach twisted the more Remus talked about how he might just get to live to a healthy age.

Lily drifted to the side, mind racing. If Remus wasn’t a member, that left an opening for someone else…but who? Nearby, Emmeline, Marlene, and Mary were snapping pictures of themselves, arms linked and mouths wide-open. They stopped after a quick succession of pictures to pull Lily into the frame. Cheek-to-cheek with Emmeline, Lily could smell her moisturizer and feel the baby hairs that grew from her temples. Marlene stood behind her, arms thrown around Lily’s neck; because Marlene was so short, she had to lay her chin on Lily’s shoulder to stay in-frame. It was so unexpected, this sudden inclusion in a group of a girls that had once seemed unapproachable to Lily from even a few meters away, that an unexpected laugh burst from her lips and that was when the camera clicked, capturing forever her look of thrilled disbelief.

They all sat down, cross-legged in a circle to talk about their plans for the summer holiday. Everyone, except for Marlene, who flitted away to flirt with a sixth-year Ravenclaw when she saw his girlfriend had walked away for a moment.

“This summer, I’m getting ahead on all of my assignments, especially Charms. I’m going to start the year right,” Emmeline said.

Lazily, Mary drawled, “You say that every year, and somehow it never happens.”

“This year will be different. It’s a NEWT year, so I have to take things seriously,” Emmeline said. Despite her protests, Lily could already see how Emmeline would let the summer dwindle to nothing without ever cracking open one of her textbooks. There would be long walks in the mornings before the sun rose too high or the humidity grew too cloying. Then, there would be hours spent in the pool, swimming laps and tightening muscles that were already firm from a lifetime of outdoor activity. Maybe there’d be one day, when the heat wasn’t too great, and Emmeline was lying on a stretch of vivid green grass, where she might lift a textbook above her head, shielding her eyes from the blinding sun, and peer with half-interest at the introduction. She might even flip a page. But the call of summer would be too great, and she’d soon toss it aside in favor of feeling the rays of the sun beat directly onto her sunburnt face.

“What about you, Mary?” Lily asked.

“My dad’s suckered me into helping out with a few of his classes, grading papers, organizing his office, scheduling, things like that. He’ll pay me, though, so it’s not all bad. That’s three days a week, so the other two, I’ll work on my tan, catch up with my muggle friends. My aunt’s coming to visit for the Silver Jubilee, so that’ll be a whole month of cleaning, while my mum panics about the state of the house, like Aunt Sarah’s going to disown us if there’s dust on the window sills. And, I have tickets to the Led Zeppelin concert in August, so that’ll be fun. I’m going with Jane and Nance,” Mary said, addressing Emmeline with the last bit as Lily could only presume that Jane and Nance were her aforementioned muggle friends.

“Getting to work with you father at uni sounds wonderful,” Lily sighed enviously. “I’d kill for a job where I actually get to learn something. I’m sure my sister will have arranged something ghastly for me.”
“It won’t be all bad,” Emmeline reassured her. “I bet Sirius will apparate over constantly. It’s not like he’ll be busy with anything like responsibility over the summer. Speaking of…” Emmeline turned to Mary, “Feels like there was a lack of boys in your plans for this summer, which is just inexcusable.”

“I’ll break at least one heart this summer just for you,” Mary promised.

“What about you?” Lily said, addressing Emmeline. She wasn’t sure what possessed her to salt the same old wound over and over again, but she couldn’t stop herself. “I wouldn’t be surprised if James apparated over to see you a few times this summer.” Neither Mary or Emmeline said anything, and Lily grew uncomfortable, realizing that she’d once more walked into something offensive with Emmeline, and she couldn’t figure out how. “Sorry! I thought you two might be getting back together because you’ve been spending so much time together. That’s all.”

“I decided to forgive him enough to be friends, yeah. But we are never getting back together, and I wish people would stop acting like I’m just going to forget everything. How pathetic would I have to be to take him back?” Emmeline said, turning to Mary for confirmation.

“Extremely,” Mary seconded.

There had been hints dropped for weeks, circling around some secret wrong James committed against Emmeline. It was never mentioned by name because everyone seemed to know already. Caught up in her investigation, Lily liked to pretend that she’d ignored these clues because her brain was consumed by more important mysteries, but that wasn’t true; she had gathered up every crumb of information on James, slotting the crooked pieces together like a puzzle that might reveal him in all his splendid entirety. She wanted to know the best and worst of James Potter, and the way to discover it was simple. She’d ask.

“What happened?”

“What happened?” Emmeline echoed in disbelief, and it must have been a kind of egomania that convinced her the movements of her love life should hold such interest to Lily. That’s all Lily could make out – the pride and the anger – as Emmeline slammed her drink into the hands of a hovering house elf and marched off into the heart of the party, disappearing amid a swell of bodies.

Mary didn’t chase after, staying with Lily, arms folded and face unreadable. “You of all people ought to know what happened, Lily.”

“But I don’t.”

“It’s not that you don’t know,” Mary countered, “It’s that you’re ignorant. Ignorant, oblivious, whatever you want to call it.”

Lily reeled back at the gravest insult anyone could levy at her. Ignorant, with all its connotations; to ignore information blatantly before you, to lack the ability to recognize what’s important, to be uncouth and foolish in the face of the unknown. There was no shame in not knowing something because the potential to discover it always lay within reach, but to be ignorant to it?

In the wake of shock came anger, and Lily bristled. For the entire year, Lily had been yanked back and forth by Emmeline and her secrets, their friendship dropped without explanation, bursts of kindness followed by sudden episodes of coldness, times where Emmeline seemed to despise her. Being direct and asking Emmeline outright hadn’t worked for Lily, but then again, neither had giving the girl space. Lily was done dancing around the issue. If she was ignorant, too scared or oblivious to face the obvious truth, she would shatter it today.
There was no hope of spotting out Emmeline in the crowd; she and Lily were nearly the same height, and the boys towered well above them. Lily turned to her assigned house elf, Lindy, ordering the sweet creature to find Emmeline and report back. A minute passed between the first crack of apparition and the second, a minute that Lily spent counting out. It wasn’t awkward to stand beside Mary in hostile silence. Lily was far beyond worrying about the statue that was Mary MacDonald.

Lindy led Lily to Emmeline. She’d taken refuge down the smokers’ tunnel. Several students from all houses clustered in groups to talk between drags. Many were smoking magical cigarettes, so each puff sent neon colored smoke wafting through the air, which amassed in Lily’s lungs, choking her. As beautiful as it was disgusting. Emmeline stood a distance away from the others, leaning against stone wall.

Emmeline noticed Lily approaching and opened her mouth angrily to say something, but Lily didn’t give her a chance. “You don’t get to be cross with me, and you don’t get to just run off. I haven’t done anything to you! If anything, I should be angry, not the other way around. We were friends, real friends, and then you just dropped me, no explanations, nothing. I’ve spent this whole year feeling confused about what I did to make you hate me, but I’m sorry, I’m not a legilimens. I can’t know without you telling me!”

“I—.”

“Is it because I wasn’t there for you afterwards?” Lily asked. “Because you weren’t there for me either, Emmeline. If you recall, my whole world was falling apart, and you weren’t exactly holding my hand through it.”

The break up between Emmeline and James had barely registered to Lily at the end of her fifth year. She’d caught glimpses of the typical reactions, ripped photographs, tears in the loo, and the other girls clustered together in solidarity as they damned James with their words. None of it could penetrate the fog of Lily’s own depression, however, as she came to grips with the sudden loss of Severus, her oldest friendship decimated in two syllables. Maybe it was selfish, but she hadn’t had energy to spare for Emmeline’s pain, had doubted it could begin to measure up to her own.

“That’s not it!” Emmeline protested.

“Then, what was?” Lily demanded, so tired of asking the same question.

“Think, Lily. Think. The afternoon after our Defense OWL, outside by the lake. Do you remember what happened?”

“I’m not likely to forget,” Lily said.

“I’m not talking about what Snape did, awful as it was. I’m talking about James. What did James do?” Emmeline pressed, desperate for Lily to understand now that she was finally talking.

Lily closed her eyes and thought back to the memory that she’d so effectively suppressed. James had been bullying Severus, which was hardly what Emmeline could mean. Lily had stepped in to defend Sev, which had led to an argument. Lily telling James she’d prefer the giant squid to ever…to ever… oh no.

Quietly and taking Emmeline by the arm, Lily said, “Emmeline, he didn’t mean it. He was just trying to get a rise out of me because he was a twat back then. He wasn’t actually asking me out.”

“Yes, he was, Lily. It’s always, always been you for him,” Emmeline said, laughing humorously. “The whole time we were together, I knew that he wanted you instead. I’d wake up and look in the
mirror and imagine how I could be just a little more like you. It wasn’t enough to have the same hair, the same build, the same classes, so much in common. I wanted to figure out what change I could make that would get him to look at me like he looked at you, and I never could figure it out. Six months of humiliation, and when he asked you out, in front of half the school, in front of me – and make no mistake, he knew full well that I was nearby and listening – it was the last straw.”

The events of that afternoon reoriented and shifted around as Lily tried to see it from Emmeline’s perspective. James’ arrogant, demeaning proposal altered, and Lily could picture it differently now. Maybe those had been nerves, when he ran his hand through his hair. Maybe he’d regretted bothering Snape in the first place, where Lily could see and judge him. Maybe he’d half wanted an excuse to stop his bullying then and there.

“But why would that…why would you stop being my friends just because James was a prat? I understand that must have hurt, but you just…We were friends!” Lily said when the shock had faded enough for words.

Nearby, the group of smoking students had gone silent, listening. This was juicy gossip. When Lily turned her head to glare at them outright, they all straightened and turned, making a lot of noise with their robes to cover up their blatant spying. In retaliation, Lily took a few pointed steps down the tunnel away from the listeners, but she wasn’t matched by Emmeline, who stood rooted to the spot with her eyes downcast and her lip chewed to pieces between clenched teeth.

“I know it wasn’t fair to you. Trust me, I know, and I’ve wished I could be stronger. I wished it every day that summer, that I would see you again and be able to pretend it never happened. But you never even reached out Lily! My boyfriend asked you out in front of half the school and you never mentioned it, never checked how I was doing, never told me that James was a berk and that I should forget him. Just a summer of silence, and then, back at school, you pretended like it had never happened! I was so embarrassed, and so so tired of trying to be you. I needed space.”

Cliché said that once someone began to reveal their long-held secret, they poured out the truth in a torrent, like discretion was a stopper on an upturned bottle and once removed, there was nothing to prevent it all from spilling out. Emmeline did spew the truth, but not as cliché had it, because she’d lost control, but out of shame. Now that her own insecurities and pettiness were laid bare, Emmeline couldn’t help but over explain, hoping that each word would lend her side more credence and cover the ugliness of her jealousies.

Emmeline said, “And then, and then! Worst of all, from almost day one this year, you and James were making moon eyes at each other, like I was entirely forgotten. How was I supposed to react?”

The first niggling of guilt prompted Lily to say, “I didn’t fancy him from day one. I hated him at the start of the year.”

“Practically from day one,” Emmeline insisted, accusing. “I watched you after our first Defense class. He said something to you, and you simpered. I’d never seen you flirt before, but you were so transparent then. There was no hiding it. And James looked like he’d been struck by lightning!”

Vaguely, Lily recalled that day in September. She’d made some self-deprecating remark about her Defense skills, at the miracle that she’d scraped the necessary A on her OWL. James, overhearing, had offered to tutor her, and she’d rejected him same as always. Except this time there’d been a new heat between them. He’d been charming and made her laugh. That combined with the breadth of his shoulders and the curve of a too-sensuous mouth, and Lily had been sapped of her years’ long vendetta against James Potter. That entire first month, he hadn’t served a single detention, wasn’t caught out bullying other students by the professors or her watchful eye, and as each day confirmed his new maturity, the shell around her heart had cracked, leaving more and more space for him to slip
Lily didn’t even wonder at Emmeline having noticed her feelings for James, something that should have been secret. Maybe everyone had always known that James Potter and Lily Evans were wild for each other. Or maybe Emmeline saw more than Lily would ever give her credit.

“I’m sorry, Emmeline, but none of this was about you,” Lily said.

“That’s the problem.”

And to that, there was really nothing to say.

There was no returning to the party proper after these revelations. Her classmates brimmed with confidence, while Lily felt anything but. She couldn’t sort whether she felt guilty, wounded, angry, or none of the above. Worse, she couldn’t decide what she ought to feel. Like every large party of adolescents, there was a subset of girls sitting on the floor crying, while their friends tried to comfort them – dashed dreams as prince charming turned out to be anything but. Lily could have joined them, but she refused to be so pathetic as to cry in front of everyone; she’d sooner leave the party altogether.

She didn’t though.

Instead, Lily let her heart set her course, and it led her straight to James. Last she’d spotted him, he’d abandoned his mock duel with Sirius to join in the broom races. Lily mounted an available broom on shaky legs. No new pairs were ready to race, so she was able to fly through the tunnel – low to the ground, so a fall would merely bring a scraped knee – unhindered. From the mouth of the tunnel, it had looked like a straight shot forward before the path was obscured by darkness. Flying it now, Lily realized that after fifty meters, the tunnel began a steep descent.

Deeper. Deeper. Deeper. She flew into the heart of the castle, where the air grew cool and wet and the magic of centuries buzzed in her ears. The tunnel ultimately released her into a cavern. The rock ceiling stretched far up above, higher than even the Great Hall. Lily first couldn’t figure where they were in the castle to allow for this space to naturally form, and second wondered whether there wasn’t something unnatural, magical about this formation. Far above her, Lily could see a figure looping through the sky. James had, of course, come to the one place where he could fly free.

“Lindy, you stay here,” Lily ordered the house elf, who had apparated to her side.

“No, missy! I’m charged to stay with you,” Lindy said.

“Wasn’t there any circumstance under which you were told you should give me some privacy?” Lily asked.

Lindy bobbed her head, so that her ears smacked against her forehead. “Yes, yes. If missy wants to be touching lips with someone else, I should find somewhere to wait for her call.”

“Well, I do. There will be…err, lip touching. With him,” Lily said, pointing up to James’ solitary figure. She wasn’t sure if she was lying, and heat blossomed inside her. Eagerly now, Lindy vowed to stay away until Lily summoned her, and Lily swore the elf even gave her a parting wink.

With nothing stopping her now, Lily warily encouraged her broom upwards. It fought against her, like a nervous horse, sensing that she was uncomfortable on a broom and placing her safety first. Lily’s will won out, and after a few tense moments, she shot through the sky, hair whipping her face and falling in all directions.
Drawing close, anything she might have wanted to say vanished from her mind because all she could see was the sinuous beauty that was James on a broomstick. His broom didn’t fight him. Rather, she almost missed the broom altogether, like he could fly unaided, throwing his body into free falls, spiraling upwards in a corkscrew, or exploding into a speedy ascent. What made it all the more beautiful was the love she could sense between him and the act of flying; his flying was a tribute to the act, worshipful, and it gave him everything in return.

When James finally noticed her, he didn’t say anything. He nodded in acknowledgment, but no more. He was still ignoring her, separating himself from her for reasons she couldn’t fathom and refused to accept. In the face of his silence, Lily did what she so often did, she blathered.

“Did you know the Wright Brothers might not have actually been the first people to successfully fly a plane. You know, the muggle air transport? It’s contested, but Gustave Whitehead claims to have successfully flown his Number 21 monoplane two full years before the Wright Brothers success, and many witnesses confirm it.”

“I did not know that,” James said.

“It’s fascinating to read about how muggles fly because I can’t help but compare to how wizards fly. A broomstick works against nature. We use magic to make them bend the rules of the universe. A broomstick shouldn’t be able to support your weight, should be beholden to gravity, certainly shouldn’t be able to accelerate. But it does, because we have magic. For muggles, they have to work within the predetermined rules of the universe. So with a plane, you have an engine burning fuel and air to propel it forward, and when it does, it pushes that air backward towards the wings. As the air crashes into the wings, it’s diverted downward, and the plane is pushed upward. No tricks. No magic. And yet they fly,” Lily said.

Softly, perhaps indulgently, James looked at her. Temporarily, he’d forgotten that he was ignoring her, but it didn’t last. Running a hand over his face, James said without a hint of affection, “What are you doing here, Lily?”

“I wanted to see you.”

“Well, I don’t want to see you.”

Lily’s jaw dropped at the unexpected hostility. She desperately wanted to ask what the hell had crawled up his arse, but knew from experience that was as likely to shut him down as drag forth the answers.

Surprising them both, Lily said something completely unexpected instead, “Emmeline told me why you broke up. She also said that’s why we – me and her, I mean – aren’t friends anymore. I never could figure it, and now…I don’t know what to think.”

Her strategy worked, and James stopped his meandering flying outright. His hands nervously raked through the tract of his hair, and Lily marveled at the fact that he’d so casually remove both hands from his broom, like his thighs were strong enough to save him from a 100-meter drop that would spell certain death. Lily’s hands hadn’t loosened their grip on the handle for a moment.

“I’m sorry,” James confessed. “I’m so, so sorry. I was such a prat last year, and I’ve already talked it out with Em, but words can only do so much. I never meant for it to blow back on you.”

Lily stopped and savored this, her first apology from James. “I know you didn’t mean to affect our friendship. You weren’t thinking. Speaking of not thinking, maybe we should have this conversation on, you know, solid ground. I’m too young and too full of potential to die today.”
Begrudgingly, James followed her descent to the ground. He landed several seconds before her, taking it at a dive that set the hairs on Lily’s arms on end. On unsteady feet, Lily tried to resettle her land legs. James needed no transition period, and his mind was too caught up in memories of the last year and his behavior to wait a few seconds while Lily regained her bearings.

“That’s putting it kindly,” James said without a hint of kindness for himself. “I was an absolute bastard. To you, but especially to Em. And I don’t like to think about it because it feels so far from who I am today, like I can’t even imagine doing that now, but I did. And, I probably should have apologized to you sooner.”

“I never could understand it…why you would get like that with others, acting like a bully. It’s so beneath you,” Lily said.

It was something she’d rarely thought about because she could compartmentalize like no other. The sins of the James of yesterday held no bearing on the charming James that she attended classes with today. But it was impossible to understand someone properly without unveiling their past. Why else did she pour through biographies and histories with such passion but to understand the makings of genius.

“Growing up, there were so many people there to tell me I was this great person. You hear you’re a good person over and over again, and you stop thinking of it as something you have to actively earn and think of it as something inherent. I was a good person, regardless of what I did, so why not torture Snape for the hell of it. It’s fun, and I’m the good guy, right? And, it’s no excuse, but it would make Sirius so happy, and he needed that. I’m not saying he peer-pressured me into it or anything like that, but if I picked a fight with someone, Sirius would just light up. Somehow, I started rationalizing it all as me being a good friend. Like, flipping Snape upside down that day is justice because I’m the good guy, and he’s a nasty Slytherin bigot. More than half the school seemed to agree with me too. I was a bastard,” James finished, red-faced with shame.

“But you changed.” It was a statement of fact, but there was a hidden question there: why?

“Last summer, Sirius moved in with us. I think I fully realized for the first time how much I was responsible for him. He may have enjoyed it, but cruelty isn’t what was missing for him. He needed balance, perspective. Then…there were a few…incidents. One during the year and one over Christmas ‘hols. And they both really pressed home again, just how much I needed to be the stable one. For him and Remus, too. They all rely on me. Peter, too, if I’m honest. And if I’m being a dick and taking nothing seriously, I’m failing them. All of them. So I grew up because that’s what they needed,” James said.

Lily wondered if James too was thinking back to Sirius in the Room of Requirement, crying his eyes out at memories that threatened to overtake his sanity. Whatever these “incidents” entailed, they’d been violent, traumatic. And, it was James who was tasked with piecing Sirius back together again. Lily may have been intrigued by that responsibility when she first started dating Sirius, seen the romance in healing what was broken, but it would always be James who mended Sirius back together again, not her.

“Maybe it wouldn’t have mattered,” James continued, obstinately looking away to the puddled ground below, anywhere but at her. “When it came to you, I never could seem to stop myself. I’m not saying I don’t bear the responsibility for it, but you would enter a room and my brain would go fuzzy.”

“You seem to be doing a good job ignoring me these days,” Lily said. It hadn’t escaped her that he was speaking in the past tense.
“I wish I could ignore you, Lily. Fuck, I fall asleep most nights wishing that when I wake up you’ll be out of my head. Do you have any idea how exhausted I am? I’m going batty watching you with Sirius, and I can’t keep it up anymore! I know Sirius was your second choice. I know it! So, I don’t understand why you won’t just end things with him, stop stringing the both of us along. I can’t even tell which is worse, when I see you with him, or when we’re alone together, and we’re not even doing anything! But I can’t even look at you without feeling like I’m betraying my best mate. But I don’t stop looking. And I honestly can’t tell some days whether I hate you or love you more.”

They were in the running for world’s worst communicators, both drawing conclusions and making plans for the future without ever consulting the other. It would be the greatest threat to their relationship unless they could learn to speak up early about their problems. And they were going to have a relationship, of that Lily was one thousand percent certain. It was time James knew as well.

Lily drew close to James, closer than she’d ever been, closer even than the day in the prefects’ tub. Warmth emanated from him. Very slowly, so that he could watch what she was doing and stop her if he grew skittish, Lily lifted her hands to his face. The one cradled his jaw – prickly, with a day and half’s stubble – and with two fingers extended from the other, she smoothed over the crinkle in his brow, where he carried all his tension.

At first, when she touched him, James froze up tighter than ever. Under the influence of her massaging fingers, he relaxed. James didn’t touch her in return. Just watched her. Finally deciding that he was ready, Lily, without adding so much as a step of space between them, moved from his face to his hands. Both of his larger hands knotted beneath her own. She was sweaty and nervous, which he could feel in the way she squeezed onto him.

“I was going to end things with Sirius tomorrow,” she said.

“Lily, don’t lie just because –”

She refused to let him finish. “I’m not lying. I know that the relationship is a farce. I’ve known it for a while. I just didn’t want to end things while term was still on and hurt him more than necessary. I wanted him to have one last night. But more than anything, I didn’t mean to hurt you. That’s the last thing I would want. I guess I got so distracted by my goals and plans that I forgot to look at what was right in front of me. It may seem like I didn’t care, but I swear every time you weren’t looking at me, I was looking at you because it’s you I wanted. Just you.”

It was too much for James, what he wanted and dared not hope for, and she could read the hesitation there. She hated that she’d given him so much cause to doubt what for her was obvious.

“Tomorrow. I promise you that I will break up with Sirius first thing tomorrow.”

James turned his palms upside down, forcing Lily to release him, only so that he could recapture her hands in his own. The thumbs stroked along the back of her hands, and it felt perfect for something so simple. Lily closed her eyes on a sigh.

Unbidden, she remembered being five years old. For one of her sewing projects, her mum had made her a frilly pink tutu. It was all Lily wore for weeks over her jeans, tights, other skirts, it made no difference. On the porch of their miniature front yard, Lily had torn through wrapping paper to unearth her present. And when she was finished her manic, ecstatic shrieking, Lily had twirled around and around and around until she’d fallen breathless amid a bed of yellow dandelions, confident she’d never been so happy and that every day would bring nothing but joys to come.

James kissed her, and she was right back in that tutu. He was salty from tequila shots, chapped from
windy rides on his broom, and destructive with the force of his passion. Lily sank entirely into his arms. It felt like bathing beneath a waterfall. His lips were thicker than hers, so it was almost impossible to capture his, each time she nipped his bottom lip was a hard fought battle, and all the more delicious for it. In comparison, he would suck on her lower lip until her neck titled back in obeisance and she was panting for want of him.

For the next hour, Lily made several discoveries: the contours of James’ mouth, the mottled purple color of his tongue, the thickness of his eyelashes when they were closed on a breath of pleasure, the choking sound that always preceded a full moan.

It was a night full of discoveries, and later, when Lily was ensconced safely in bed, her notebook laid open on her lap, Lily wrote just four words: So this is love.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The noise of students bustling to and fro was loud enough that it drifted from the common room, up the spiraling staircase, down the stretch of hall, and into the sixth-year dormitory, where it eliminated the possibility of sleep. Not that Lily minded. She’d woken before the sun and the rowdy exodus of students; woken but not risen. With the curtains drawn and her heaps of blankets piled high to her chin, Lily laid without a thought of leaving. She’d heard Emmeline – two beds to the left – follow her morning rituals and pack her remaining belongings. An hour later, Marlene had emerged with a sigh and slam of the door to the loo. Lastly, Mei-Lin had left her bed on padded slippers to eat an early breakfast. Only Lily made no move.

For the first time that she could recall, Lily was at peace with the company of her thoughts and nothing more. She didn’t need the stimuli of the external world because the tenor of her dreams was sweet and clear.

Lily was suffused with love. Suffused with all its connotations and implications. Suffused, which brought with it the image of light, that pure burst of white-hot colorlessness that always accompanied an ascent to heaven in films. Love here meant survival because light was that which warms, which sustains. As the discovery of fire was key to Neanderthal survival, so too was love for humans. Suffused here also meant to fill from below. Lily liked the imagery of it, picturing her love as pink liquid, starting at her feet and slowly rising to knees, to hips, to throat, until it reached its final harbor at the crown of her skull, and there was not a piece of her untouched, undominated by the waters of love. And, of course, suffused meaning to pour through. Because the physical manifestation of her love would not be satisfied just filling her. No, it would burst through like a tsunami, like a laser, and everyone who saw her face would know in a second that Lily Evans was desperately, unthinkingly, hopelessly in love.

Rolling onto her side, Lily released the sigh of lovers throughout history: half-contentment and half-agony. Because of course, suffused shared a root with suffer – sub – both rising from beneath.

Lily couldn’t stay in bed all day. The Hogwarts Express would leave the station at noon with or without her. In third-year, Tristan Codrington had been abandoned at the school, foot caught in the Grand Staircase’s trick step, and none the wiser. The lovesick would not be missed.

From the confines of her bed, Lily greeted the sunny dormitory. It was cluttered as ever, floorspace occupied by trunks and suitcases and purses stuffed through to their seam-splitting limits. It was also identityless. Gone were the photographs on the walls, the fairy lights, and heaps of mismatched shoes. Any group of girls could have lived in this room, and next year, an entirely new group would.

Foregoing a shower, Lily dressed in the one outfit she’d left unpacked the day before. All week, Lily had been diligent in preparing lists of her belongings, checking each off as she slowly eradicated all proof of her existence at Hogwarts. She couldn’t escape a niggling fear that she was forgetting something essential. There wasn’t time to scour the whole castle for what was sure to be a wild goose chase, but Lily could make one last sweep of the common room.

On the final step, Lily craned her neck to see above the heads of her many classmates, who’d had the same idea to congregate in the common room. The head of hair she sought was nowhere in sight. Disappointed, Lily walked the perimeter of the room, drawing closer to the center in concentric circles. Finding anything in the throng of bodies was difficult, but Lily paused to lift couch cushions.
and check beneath chairs. Her diligence paid off and she ended her search with three loose knuts and a torn piece of parchment with her notes on Ida B. Wells, taken all the way back in October and tucked away in the crevice of an armchair to be forgotten.

Lily tucked her precious finds in her pocket and returned upstairs. She’d also want to search the lavatory for forgotten toiletries. Opening the door to the loo, Lily almost collided with Mary, who’d just emerged from a shower. The other girl’s hair was rolled up into a towering taupe towel, her long forehead on display, along with stretches of naked skin, gone red beneath the hot water.

“Sorry,” Lily said immediately, sliding aside so that they could trade places. They were the first words she’d spoken since her world had twisted and transformed, and Lily was delighted to find the existence of other people didn’t diminish the depth of her love at all.

Making quick work of her bathroom search, Lily returned to their dormitory. Immodestly, Mary had slipped into nothing but a set of brown lingerie, blending seamlessly with her skin. Mary tossed her shampoo and other cosmetics into her open trunk with no consideration for order and cleanliness.

Wincing at the sight, Lily said, “You shouldn’t just put your shampoo in like that. What if it spills all over your clothes? You won’t be able to use magic over the summer.”

“I hate packing,” Mary said grimly. Under Lily’s worried eye, Mary removed her toiletries and repacked them in a separate bag.

Mary’s disdain for the effort it took to pack was a small thing, but it bothered Lily. It was the first day of her new life, and she wanted to believe that everyone, in every moment, would be as tranquil and sated as she’d felt lounging in bed that morning. Lily thought she knew what Mary was missing, too: love. Lily had taken Mary’s, scooped it up like leftover, unwanted vanilla ice cream, free for the taking, when it was anything but. Pursuing Sirius had been selfish, but Lily could rectify things easily. She wouldn’t tell Mary that she was set to chuck Sirius first thing that day – Sirius ought to be the third person to know – but she could hint.

“Hey, Mary,” Lily said, waiting until Mary looked up from where she struggled with the lock of her trunk before continuing, “I wanted to let you know that I’m sorry for taking Sirius from you this year. It felt right at the time, and I just kind of fell into it, but it was a shite thing to do. This year was a bit of a bust, but I think next year we’ll all have a chance to be happy. And, I promise not to get in the way of that for you again.”

“You didn’t take Sirius from me, Lily,” Mary said.

“Maybe a bad choice of words. Sorry. Interfered?” Lily said.

Mary rolled her eyes, hefting her trunk off her bed and onto the floor, where it rested with the other trunks. The house elves would collect and deliver them to the station at ten. Mary’s cat wound between her bare legs, shivering whenever its whiskers brushed skin.

“You didn’t take Sirius from me. You didn’t have a thing to do with anything. I gave him up,” Mary corrected.

Lily didn’t mention that it was a mighty big coincidence that Mary’s giving Sirius up corresponded exactly with Lily asking him out. Allowing Mary her pride was the loving thing to do after all.

Even in her silence, Lily’s condescension must have been obvious because Mary uncharacteristically explained, “He changed after New Year’s. When his father died. I don’t understand why he cared so much. He hated him. Sirius may hate his brother, his mother, his whole rotten family, but he hated
“Losing a parent can be hard,” Lily said.

“Yes, and I know a good girl would be there for him through all of it. But that’s not me. If he wanted to just cry or beat a pillow, maybe I would have. But he’s unpredictable. And, it’s all the time. Every day with the drinking! I decided a long time ago that I’m not going to put myself through that. I won’t deal with it, and I’ve told him as much. He didn’t listen, so I gave him up. Simple.”

Mary’s worldview was unapologetic, cold, and crystal clear to the point that Lily couldn’t tell whether to judge or admire Mary for it. Mary had called Sirius a slave to his emotions, the antithesis of Mary herself. Yet opposites attracted, and Lily clung stubbornly to the belief that true happiness awaited the two if they would only embrace their love, for real this time, without the drama and philandering of the past.

“I don’t think I could just do that. Cut off someone I loved,” Lily said.

“I know. You and Emmeline are so similar. Pathetic, if we’re both being blunt. You’d both do well to learn by my example. Just don’t care about things, Lily. Then suddenly, you find everything’s easy.”

Lily left the dormitory, certain that Mary was horribly, heartbreakingly wrong and wondering how her roommate had become so jaded. Someone ought to intervene and help Sirius and Mary find their way back to one another. It wouldn’t be Lily. She was no Emma, no matchmaker, and sure to botch the entire operation. But she could at least plant the idea in Sirius’s mind. Then, she’d wash her hands of the both of them. Lily lacked the time and inclination to worry her day away on other’s love woes.

While the rest of the castle tried to find their friends, lost in the crowd of departing students, Lily met Mei-Lin outside the library, their favored spot since third-year when they realized that not even the most dedicated of swots spent their last hours at Hogwarts studying. At the sight of her friend – one of her last for the coming months – Lily burst into tears and enveloped Mei-Lin in a shuddering hug. It was an uncomfortable embrace because Mei-Lin held her tabby, Frannie, in her arms throughout, the anxious creature writhing at the assault, but Lily didn’t mind.

“I’m going to miss you so much,” Lily wailed into the bone of Mei-Lin’s shoulder.

“You have to promise to write every week. Every day even!” Mei-Lin returned, equally emotional.

It was their sixth such goodbye since they first met, but it never became easier. Both girls had been forged in the fires of loneliness. Mei-Lin, shy and mostly friendless, Lily too loud, too odd, too magical. Hogwarts offered them an escape from that silent stretch of hours, the days whisking by without a kind word uttered. They both became something different through their friendship. They found homes in one another. It was no wonder that their goodbyes were wrought.

“I’ll write as often as I can. I’ll tell you all about my new job, and Petunia’s boy struggles, and what I’m reading,” Lily promised.

“That’s not enough,” Mei-Lin said, shaking her head vigorously. “I want a minute-by-minute itinerary of your day.”

“Ugh, it’s not fair! I wish we could just apparate,” Lily moaned.

They were both seventeen, but their birthdays had done no good on that front. Mei-Lin had failed her
apparition exam, clamming up during the test out of fear. The gory accounts of splinching had laid roots in her brain, and Mei-Lin couldn’t raise her wand to cast the spell without shaking, her determination nonexistent. Lily hadn’t taken the exam because she lacked the funds to register with the Ministry.

“Next year,” Mei-Lin said fiercely.

“Next year,” Lily seconded.

“Oi! This is just pitiful!”

Will had arrived, and, like every year, he was dry-eyed and tasked with wrenching their clinging bodies apart to herd them toward the train station. With twin shouts of his name, both girls tried to wrestle him into their embrace. They’d miss him too. So much so that Mei-Lin forgot that she pretended to hate him.

“Ladies! We have a train to catch,” Will shouted, slapping their hands away and shooing them in the right direction. “If you waste much more time, we’ll be stuck with the compartment by the loo! Is that what you want?”

Amid similar admonitions, Will managed to force Lily and Mei-Lin to the grounds, where the seemingly invisible carriages awaited them. Will tried to bodily toss her into a carriage, but Lily lurched free and turned to stare up at Hogwarts. Beneath the strength of the sun, the castle blurred, grew hazy; she could almost see the heat rising from the stone walls. Lily craned her neck, trying to see to the top of the tallest tower. Overhead, a flock of birds swooped freely in a cloudless sky. Lily wished she could wrap her arms around the castle and hold it to her as she did Mei-Lin. This goodbye was always the hardest.

From her robes, Lily summoned a beaten-down polaroid camera. She raised the lens and clicked, capturing Hogwarts in that moment, that pristine moment, forever and ever.

She turned to Will. “Now I’m ready to go.”

The first half of the train ride was marvelous. Nostalgia had already colored their memories of sixth-year in a rosy hue, and their compartment was raucous with reminiscences about the year’s adventures. Lily laid with her head across Will’s lap, smiling up at Dorcas and Mei-Lin, who’d never laughed louder. Everyone was too charged with the thrill of the summer holiday and the awareness that they’d have to survive without each other to say an unkind word. In every laugh, Lily saw proof of the world of love that she’d envisioned in bed.

There was one errand that couldn’t be put off any longer, however, that made Lily rise to her feet as the English countryside blurred past through the windows. Waiting for the station to find Sirius was a mistake. He could disappear with James before she had the chance to end things, and Lily dreaded the misunderstanding that might cause.

The Marauders always commandeered a compartment at the very front of the train because it meant they were the candy trolley’s first stop. Lily knocked at their typical compartment and was bid entry by a medley of masculine voices. They were all there, all but the boy she most wanted to see and who her errand didn’t demand: Peter had stretched his chubby legs out to rest on the seat opposite him, Sirius lounged in a half-lean against Peter’s shoulder, his robes bunched up to serve as a pillow against the crook of his neck, and Remus sat in the corner, limbs folded primly. Without James, the compartment was somehow thrice as empty.
“Hullo, luv. Come sit with me.” Sirius patted the slip of cushion visible beside his thighs. Had she followed his instructions, they would have formed a train, Lily leaning against Sirius, leaning against Peter.

“Err, that’s alright. I was hoping to have a word with you alone,” Lily said.

Rather than leap to accommodate her request, the boys descended into complete madness, jeering like apes at a carnival. Peter had perfected a sweeping wolf-whistle, which he released while elbowing Sirius in the ribs repeatedly. Remus guffawed at the spectacle or at her, she couldn’t tell. Sirius threw his hands in the air, like he was trying to ward off their antics, yelling, “Gents, gents, please. Some decorum! Some decency,” which they all knew would only rile them up further.

Lily turned decisively on her heel and left the compartment through the door she’d never bothered to close. Eyebrows dancing, Sirius followed her out to what the boys all assumed would be a rather handsy goodbye. Outside, Sirius didn’t spring at her like she’d half-expected, but rather dropped his arms and his teasing altogether. He was soft and happy as the train made its way to the station, to his true home, far from the family he’d renounced. It would be the first return on the Hogwarts Express where Sirius didn’t sit in the corner, dreading the passing of every second. He was heading home.

It was no wonder that the Potters were top of his mind.

“I’ve been thinking it through, ever since you mentioned you couldn’t apparate, and I think it’s manageable.” Sirius said, launching ahead before Lily’s dour expression could warn him of what was to come. “Cokeworth’s only a forty-five-minute drive to Coventry, and I know a bloke there that’ll let you use his fireplace. Nice and easy if you can only manage a ride. I don’t know how buses work, other than the Knight Bus…”

“There’s not a regular bus from Cokeworth to Coventry, but that’s beside the point,” Lily said. “I’m not sure I understand why you’re trying to ship me out to Coventry. To use a fireplace?”

Sirius rolled his eyes, “To use the floo network, obviously. We can’t get your house set up when it’s deeded to muggles.”

“And the whole lacking a fireplace altogether.” Lily muttered.

“So, if you can make it to Coventry, it’s just a quick floo, and then Gloucestire. And, we’ve got about thirty rooms that are never used, so you can even stick around for the night. No funny business and no fun, of course. I imagine Euphemia will be hovering behind your shoulder every second to keep us and beds far apart, so your parents needn’t worry,” Sirius said.

Understanding dawned, bringing with it a rush of cold, dead panic. To visit the Potters over the summer holiday, but holding the hand of the wrong boy, to be thought of as “a nice girl for Sirius” by Mr. and Mrs. Potter!

Lily didn’t pause to order the words, didn’t think before blurting out, “Break up!”

“What?”

The words existed, floated through the universe now, even if Sirius hadn’t caught onto her garbled meaning. Lily could breath, could think about the damaged boy in front of her and remember that she wanted to cut as cleanly as possible. She owed him that (and so much more that she just couldn’t give in a dimension where James Potter drew breath.)

“The summers are a stressful time for me, seeing my sister and father. I have to work ridiculous hours. And, I’m just so separated from the wizarding world, from school. I’ve never had a boyfriend
over the summer, and that’s been intentional, Sirius. I like you. I shouldn’t have been, but I was almost surprised by how much I liked you as we got to know each other better. But...as a friend. I think we should be friends.”

“You’re serious?” he said, offering her a moment of time where everything hung in the precipice of uncertainty, where she could haul her words back, laugh them off and escape the mounting unease that dominated the narrow corridor.

“Yeah, I am,” Lily said.

“That’s - I thought...”

Stricken, Sirius couldn’t finish a sentence, couldn’t look at her. Lily blinked once, twice, three times and on the last blink her eyelashes emerged wet from tears. It would never make sense to her how perennially mistreated, abandoned Sirius Black had opened himself up enough to care for her. He ought to have been hard and unyielding, a door with fifteen locks and a secret knock besides, before anyone could touch the meat of him. Just like the character he affected, always too sophisticated and knowing, laughing at a joke that no one else was privy to. But that had never been Sirius Black. Not really.

A smarter boy, a true survivor would have held her at arm’s length.

The train jostled around a bend. Dull thuds echoed from many of the closed compartments as people’s unsecured belongings fell. Lily stumbled slightly, a hand bracing against Sirius’s arm. The touch jarred him out of his shock, and he brushed her aside firmly, like one might a bee, that combination of fear and decisiveness.

“I’m sorry,” Lily said.

“Don’t be. Be sure to have a wonderful summer,” Sirius said coolly. Already he’d recovered enough to slip behind the facade of effortless aristocracy, the boy he ought to have been.

Lily didn’t know what to say to him. Hearing him mention her summer, Lily recognized how lifeless and pathetic her excuse sounded. She’d dumped him to focus on her summer holiday? Like the train, their course was decided, the track laid down, and there would be no last minute segues, no change of heart. Try as Lily might – and she would try – the outcome was decided the moment she chose to betray the fragile trust that Sirius had unwisely granted her.

“I’m sorry,” Lily said again. “I’m sorry if this seems sudden to you. It wasn’t to me. I really, honestly, truly want us to be friends though, and that’s not a line. I hope you can forgive me enough for that. I’ll write to you this summer, okay? I’ll write, and you can write me back - maybe? If you’re feeling up to it?”

Unbidden, Lily remembered an afternoon earlier that month, where it had just been her and Sirius in the library. He’d followed her on a whim, pretending that every chair, book, and corner was brand new to him, like he hadn’t visited the library in his entire Hogwarts career. Lily had resented his company because it was hard enough to force herself to study for an exam, and she knew he’d be a distraction. Except he wasn’t. He’d sat quietly, watching her revise, through the shag cut of his bangs. A beam of light fell from the high windows across the table, and in it, they could count the particles of dust in the air. Separated from their friends, James, howlers, Mary, any audience, neither of them felt forced to perform, and in those minutes, Lily felt they’d come to a quiet understanding of souls.

Lily thought Sirius was stirred by similar memories, maybe not the afternoon in the library, but some
other moment over the past few months where they’d enjoyed one another outside the trappings of romance or sex. In his silence, she allowed herself a glimmer of hope that this goodwill would win out, but, of course, it didn’t. The train was already running, and it would mow down anyone in its wake.

“I wouldn’t wait by the window looking for my owl,” Sirius said coldly.

And splat, the train continued on its collision course, reducing Lily to mush in the process.

“Okay,” Lily said, feeling small.

“If that’s all then. I don’t think Remus can survive without me much longer,” Sirius said, a half-joke that didn’t make either of them smile.

“Okay.”

She didn’t make a move to leave, so Sirius rolled his eyes and said, “That means go away, Lily.”

“Of course.”

This time, Lily moved to the side, so that Sirius could sweep past her, and like the phrase cold-shoulder suggested, she swore waves of ice emanated from him. He levelled her with one last hard look before the compartment door slid decisively closed, and Lily knew it was the last she’d see of Sirius for a long time.

After the first wave of tears, Lily had been careful to suppress her crying. Sirius wouldn’t appreciate her turning weepy. In their story, she was the villain, and she had no right to make herself a victim, to blur the lines. Now that he was gone, she allowed herself to slump against the shaking walls and let a few tears drop. Her own callousness was starting to shock her, and she clung to all the promises she’d made about becoming a better person, like they somehow expunged her present guilt. With rough knuckles, she wiped away her stream of tears and straightened her shoulders. Then, she saw him.

There, not far down the corridor, was James. The situation was inherently embarrassing, and Lily’s reaction to his simple presence worsened matters. She jolted at the sight of him, eyes drawn to his lips – like there should be some evidence there of their transgressions, a smear of lipstick she hadn’t even worn, a plumping from her blunt teeth –and her stomach clenched. The initial shock faded and something else set in as every muscle in her body relaxed.

James. She loved James. He was a reminder of why she’d just hurt Sirius, what she stood to gain.

“Hi. I didn’t see you there,” Lily said, offering an approximation of a smile that James did not return. In fact, he didn’t say anything at all, so Lily said, “I ended things with Sirius, like I promised.”

“I saw,” James said.

Lily cocked her head to the side at the ambiguity of this statement. Saw what? Everything from her hastily blurted admission to their stony separation? Or had he arrived somewhere in the middle? Did it make a difference at all?

“Well, I’m glad it’s over - with Sirius I mean. You have to close a book before you can start a new one,” Lily said, reaching out and taking James’s hand, the one closest to her. It hung limp in her grasp, and there was a layer of grime beneath his thumbnail that she wanted to scoop up with her own nail, like she loved to pick at a scab. “I guess that didn’t make much sense because I’m reading three books at the same time right now, but you know what I mean.”
James ruffled his hair with his free hand and twisted side-to-side, eyes straying to the closed compartment, which held Sirius. A cold drop of dread entered her heart, but Lily crushed it mercilessly. James hadn’t ripped his hand from hers, hadn’t stormed away. It was too early to start drawing conclusions. Though the longer he avoided eye contact, the less she could comfort herself.

“He looked upset,” James said.

Lily blinked stupidly for a moment before she realized he was talking about Sirius, already slipping into a secondary role in her brain, which was so eager to replace him with James. Whether Sirius looked upset or not wasn’t something Lily could confirm, though Lily couldn’t recall if she’d ever mentioned her struggle with reading faces to James before. Obviously, Sirius was unhappy with Lily’s seemingly sudden decision, but she didn’t like to imagine his feelings extended much beyond shock and a hurt ego. Besides, Lily imagined a truly wounded Sirius would lash out like an animal, snapping and hissing in a wild bid to defend itself, and Sirius had been firm but far from mean.

“I think he’s a little upset right now,” Lily said, “but give him the summer, and he’ll come around.”

“To some things maybe, but to others…”

“What does that mean?” Lily asked with a tentative hope that she would later chock up to the naivety of young love.

James squeezed her hand. Dropped it. “I’m going to go talk to the boys. We’ll be in the station soon.”

“James...Will you write me?” Lily asked.

“Have a nice summer, Lily.”

She didn’t move, eyes trained on his back as he entered the shared compartment, as he decisively closed the door behind him. Unlike the last time James had stomped all over her heart, Lily wasn’t wrecked with the surprise of it. The morning had passed in a haze of gooey feelings, but deep down she had known there was a catch. James had admitted his guilt at having feelings for her, the gut wrench at betraying his dearest friend, so Lily knew immediately that seeing Sirius’s pain had sapped James’ love for her, or at least weakened it. He’d felt a choice needed to be made, and he’d made it. Simple as that.

There was no returning to the cozy world of her friends after that. Stumbling like a recently-woken coma patient, Lily found a half-full compartment – the other occupants were three startled third-years – nearby and sank into the remaining seat. The children scooted to the side, so that she could press her nose against the glass of the window. The Hogwarts Express plowed through the countryside, reducing the passing landscape into an acid trip of color and impressions. As she watched, these colors began to favor brown and grey over green and blue, a sign that they were entering the industrial rings outside London, nearing their destination.

More than friendship, Lily thought it was karma that had wrecked her. She normally didn’t fall into fatalism, but it all seemed so obvious now. She couldn’t string Sirius along in her plot, set him aside when she was finished with him, and have James smiling at the end of it all. There had to be consequences, otherwise people wouldn’t grow past their mistakes. The universe was like a tight-lipped mother, not happy to have to punish her wayward daughter, but unmoving in her decision. Lily would suffer, she would grow, and she would come out the other end a better person. The only loss was the first great love of her life.

At the station, Lily left without saying a word in parting to her friends. Bent at the neck, she couldn’t
see anything but her trainers and the meter of space in front of her, darting to the side at the last second to avoid her fellow travelers, all in such a rush to catch their train. As if the great train of life was something that could be missed.

Lily saw Petunia before her sister noticed her. The Ford Corsair was parked a block from the station, and Petunia was rifling through the glove compartment, probably for a tube of emergency lipstick because it seemed impossible that her goal was the drivers’ manual, with the first twenty pages torn out. Petunia started when the door clicked, and Lily slid into the passenger seat, hefting her trunk over her shoulder, so that it would land haphazardly in the back. There was a moment where Petunia’s gaze raked Lily top from bottom, eating up every perceived fault so that she could dish them out one by one over the coming months, but it last only a moment. Then, Petunia unsnapped her safety belt to reach for Lily, drawing her into the frail crush of her arms.

On instinct, Lily buried her face into the swell of Petunia’s breasts, just like a child might their mother. The scent of something rancid clung to Petunia’s clothes, a visit to the butcher’s shop before she’d left for the station, and the dash of gardenia perfume did little to mask it. Beneath it all, however, was the smell Lily could pick out amid a thousand competing scents, the smell of lying by the pool in jean shorts, of begging Petunia to be allowed to push the cart at the grocery store, of chasing Petunia through the street with an outstretched toad in her hands. It was the smell of home.

Lily smiled for the first time since her encounter with James as she realized that she smelled like Petunia, something deeper than blood connecting them across land or sea. For a moment longer, Petunia allowed Lily to cling to her, reveling in the same familial intimacy, but then she had shrugged Lily aside, pressed an imaginary wrinkle from her skirt, and shifted the car into drive.

“You look thin. Too thin,” Petunia said, eyes never deviating from the road ahead. Petunia obeyed traffic laws religiously, so that Lily could turn into a penguin in the passenger seat without earning so much as a side-glance from her sister, and Lily half-questioned how Petunia could tell. “Don’t they feed you at that school?”

“Plenty. I just forget sometimes. Besides, I don’t think I’ve lost any weight since Christmas.” Lily fingered the sleeve of her blouse, trying to decide whether there was more space between fabric and flesh than there had been months before.

“Well, I’ve cooked dinner. Lord knows whether Dad will make it home in time. All he’s talked about for weeks is the big day, ‘Lily’s grand return,’ but his promises count for less than a quid, so we’ll see. I’ve made all your favorites: toad-in-the-hole, Lancashire hotpot, and brussel sprouts. There’s also a gallon of vanilla for dessert.”

“We’re going to have leftovers for a week,” Lily muttered darkly. Already, she could foresee how Petunia would refuse to cook anything all week, until every bite of her welcome home feast was finished. At Hogwarts, Lily was spoilt by variety.

“Don’t be ridiculous. You must have such a massive appetite from your trip. You’ll eat it all tonight.”

“Your children are going to be massive, Petty,” Lily said, leaning her head against the window, glass rattling beneath her temple.

Petunia’s fingers pulsed on the steering wheel; knuckles gone white. “My children are going to never go hungry, and they’re going to know that I will always take care of them.”

Money had always been scarce, but they could scrounge up enough to survive. There was never fear that the next meal wouldn’t come, that they’d waste away in the night; but there had been hunger. There had been weeks of temporary lay-offs, when Petunia would reign over the kitchen cupboards
like a war-time general, apportioning every mouthful of beans with hawk-eyed scrutiny. For Lily, Hogwarts had brought food security when she was eleven, but those periods of scarcity had never truly ended for Petunia.

“Nothing wrong with a chubby baby. They’re the cutest kind,” Lily offered graciously.

“I’m not pregnant, Lily. Honestly! Is this your way of implying I’ve gained weight?” Petunia snapped.

“No, though now that you mention it…”

If Petunia hadn’t been driving, she would have smacked Lily for that. As it was, Lily preened in the safety of the passenger seat as Petunia turned pink. Her sister was gaunter than Lily herself, so any weight gain would have been a compliment, but Petunia naturally didn’t see it that way. Lily could see bones press against the skin of Petunia’s wrists as she drove, her exoskeleton birdlike and breakable.

They easily lapsed into silence. London traffic was a nightmare on the weekend, and Petunia devoted all of her attention to following the signs that would direct them out of the city. She was an anxious driver and would slam the brakes whenever there was a slowdown up ahead, sending Lily careening forward and then back in her seat.

The silence wasn’t a friend to Lily. She had exhausted her store of tears for James and Sirius, but the guilt and heartbreak remained. The car radio was broken, but Lily twisted the knobs and pushed the buttons sullenly just for an excuse to do something. Once London was far behind them and the scenery transformed to rolling fields of absent-minded sheep, Lily turned her attention out the window. She made a game of trying to count the species of trees, flowers, animals that flew past on the road. A herd of cattle, spotted brown, put an end to this distraction as they reminded Lily of the special breed of cows that James had told her lived in his hometown. The mental image of James racing behind a herd of cows, a little boy, laughing and playing, hurt too much.

They’d been on the road for nearly and hour and a half when Petunia burst out, “That’s it! What is wrong with you?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? You haven’t said a word since we left! Normally, I have to beg you to let me think for a second,” Petunia said.

“I know, so I’m just doing you a favor and keeping my mouth shut for once. You’re welcome, Tuney,” Lily said.

Petunia half-snorted before she caught the unladylike sound and swallowed it back up with a choking noise. “Unlikely. Something else is going on. Is it that Snape brat? If he’s upset you again like last year, I swear I’ll kill him.”

“No you won’t,” Lily said.

“No, I won’t. But I will talk to his mother. You can be sure of that,” Petunia snarled.

Lily turned bright, adoring eyes on her sister. To visit the home of a witch, to confront her, would be no small feat for Petunia, who was secretly petrified of Spinner’s End and its inhabitants, and yet Lily didn’t doubt Petunia would go to war for her. The true story of Lily and Sev’s falling out had been carefully censored because Petunia couldn’t possibly be allowed to find out about the death eaters and their anti-muggleborn prejudice. Instead, Lily had kept things vague: Severus was a bully,
who’d said awful things to her, and now wouldn’t leave her alone. Petunia’s already sour opinion of Sev allowed her to fill in the blanks from there, and she’d concluded that Severus had tried it on and failed miserably.

Petunia could never understand, not fully. There was too much that Lily had to keep separate from her sister for both their sakes, but if there was one thing Lily could count on her sister for, it was taking her side over that of a wizard’s, so Lily admitted miserably, “My boyfriend and I broke up today. I guess I’m still upset about it.”

“Why’d he break up with you?” Petunia asked.

“Who says he broke up with me?” Lily demanded.

“Your pitiful face does. You shouldn’t be bothered by it. We can find you a good boy this summer. Someone better suited for you,” Petunia offered.

“Well, I am. And, I broke up with him. He…he wanted me to come stay with him this summer, and I didn’t want to be so serious so soon, and we broke up,” Lily half-confessed.

Now, Petunia did snort. “You expect me to believe that you had a chance to run off for the summer and escape work and helping out and didn’t take it? You’d run off with the circus if you thought it would save you from an hour’s honest work.”

“I would not—”

“I’d find you walking the streets like some kind of scarlet woman, if you thought you it would save you from doing the dishes for just one night,” Petunia continued, unrelenting. “I can never get anyone to help me for even a simple task. You’re always swanning off to that school and abandoning me, and then, Dad’s no help. A million demands but can’t fold his own socks. He ought to have married again by now. Get someone else to be his slave for a change.”

Not remarrying was the one gift that Lily’s father had given her, and she saw red at the implication that they needed a new woman in the house, a replacement mum. “Oh, shut up, Tuney! Anyone would think you’re drowning in housework. If you’re so busy, how do you have time to run off with Vernon three times a week?”

“You’re so right, Lily. I spend all day in my bathrobe eating bonbons. You’ve caught me,” Petunia snapped. “And because I’m such a wicked witch, I’ll force you to do all the work this summer, while I get foot massages. Paradise!”

“Don’t get hysterical,” Lily muttered darkly. “I know I’m going to work this summer. You never told me what job I got anyway.”

“Collier’s. You’ll work behind the counter,” Petunia said, in a tone of voice that effectively ended the conversation.

A mile’s walk from the house, Collier’s was the town ice cream parlor. Lily performed a quick mental tally of the pros and cons of the position to decide whether she ought to throw a fit for Petunia not getting her a job at one of her stated preferences. The pros: she’d be working beside freezers of ice cream, so she wouldn’t sweat buckets during the day; children getting ice cream were happy and adorable, and generally the clientele would be in good moods; the parlor didn’t open until one on Saturdays and was closed on Sundays, so her hours wouldn’t be too painful. The cons: she would be mopping up chocolate spills for hours on end; there was nothing to learn once she’d memorized the twelve available flavors; she’d most certainly have to make small talk with classmates from her
childhood that knew nothing about her.

“It’ll do,” Lily decided.

“So glad to have your blessing,” Petunia said. “And maybe you can plump up a bit. You look like some dirty, homeless waif.”

They didn’t share another word until they reached home.

Arnold Evans not only made it to Lily’s welcome home dinner, he was waiting for his daughter’s return at the curb. Before Petunia could set the car in park, Lily threw open the door and flung herself into her father’s arms. Lily wasn’t so little, despite Petunia’s jibes, that he could lift her into the air and twirl her about, but he wrapped his arms around her waist for a hug. Lily laid against her father’s portly stomach, and listened to his heart.

He looked older than he had over Christmas. The men of Cokeworth followed an unrelenting pattern of aging, where the first shock of age withered their faces around thirty-three, so that they looked twenty years older than their posher contemporaries, all the wear of long hours on their feet, of sucking up fumes from the mill, of banging back pints at the pub visible for all to see. Then, they froze in place, fixed for another ten years or so. And only, then, when they reached their mid- to -late forties, did they show another lightyear leap in aging. Arnold Evans boasted new lines around his mouth, deep creases in his forehead that filled up with dust from a long day, and a beard gone grey as a thunderstorm.

There was no pressure to talk to find the words to make nice with Petunia after that because her father filled in the gaps in conversation without ever noticing the tension. He had a million stories, some that were probably even true, to tell Lily about the past few months. Lily relaxed entirely, putting the pain of the day into a neat little drawer to be returned to when she was no longer luxuriating in the bliss that was home. To her father’s every story, Lily smiled and laughed and asked the right questions.

Just as she remembered, the kitchen was cramped but tidy thanks to Petunia’s efforts. They were the proud owners of a refrigerator, bought second-hand with a dent in the side that made the icebox stick, and a microwave that screamed of the new since Petunia never deigned to use it, a gift from Lily and Arnold both. One of the chairs of the oak set that they used for dining had been replaced with a green stool, which grabbed the eye in a room dominated by pale yellows.

“What happened to Tuney’s chair?” Lily asked, smoothly relegating Petunia to the stumpy stool, and settling herself into a chair of appropriate height.

Petunia sent Lily a furious and undeserved look before busying herself at the kitchen sink and countertops, where she’d piled her dishes, which wouldn’t fit on the table alongside their plates.

Their father laughed gleefully. “Vernon’s what happened!!”

“Would you please—?” Petunia tried.

“His fat arse broke it. Took one of the legs right off. We would have just cobbled it back together, but the seat shattered in the collapse. Too many pieces. Unsalvageable,” Arnold said.

Petunia let her serving spoon drop into the sink with a clang. “What Daddy’s declining to mention is that he had sawed through one of the chair legs before Vernon came over to ensure that it would break. He thought it would be a grand joke!”
“Oh, Daddy, no!” Lily said, turning pleading eyes to her father, like he might deny it.

He didn’t, of course. “What? It was damn funny seeing him haul himself up from the floor. And, he might have broken it even if I hadn’t. You never know.”

“What?” Arnold asked.

“Vernon’s not even fat!” Lily said.

“You haven’t seen him since last August,” Arnold said darkly. “Trust me, the man’s gone fat.”

Lily could only see Petunia’s back, but hurt radiated from her posture. Wanting to appease Petunia, Lily said, “Well, either way, it’s just mean.”

The spoon in the sink may have been jarring, but the sound of Arnold’s beer, flung to the floor where it shattered, was riotous. Lily leapt at the sudden carnage and shivers erupted down her arms.

She’d been too relaxed and forgotten that there was no disagreeing with defying their father in “his own home.” Compared to many fathers, he didn’t ask much from his daughters and never beat them. All he demanded was that the was made to feel adored and powerful the few nights a year he spent in their company.

Without a word, Petunia pulled the broom and pan from behind the sink to sweep away the debris. Their father didn’t speak either, sinking inward as he always did when they failed him in some way. Unless they recovered the situation, he would probably leave for the pub without touching his dinner. Lily didn’t know how to make it right. Crossing her arms over her chest, she murmured a quiet sorry, but her father didn’t acknowledge her.

On her knees now, Petunia ran a rag over the floor to mop up the spilt beer. A shard of glass had escaped her sweeping and embedded itself in her elbow, eliciting a sharp gasp. Petunia stopped only long enough to remove the debris from her skin before continuing with the cleaning.

Sick as it was, Lily saw an opening to make things right with her father and turned to Petunia, craning about in her chair to loom over her sister. “Petunia, I’m so sorry. That’s all my fault.”

“Just because you go off to your special school, Lily, you can’t come home and act like you’re better than the rest of us,” Petunia said. Lily couldn’t tell whether Petunia was playing along, a ruse they’d perfected when they were young, or if she was truly angry. There were hints of both in her voice.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again,” Lily agreed.

Mollified by Lily’s apologies, Arnold broke his silence and returned to his stream of stories. Lily listened with a wide, open face of appreciation, turning it up to eleven in the wake of her faux pas. Meanwhile, Petunia pottered about the kitchen, wringing out the rag, and serving them heaps of toad in the hole. It suited Petunia to stand while they ate, to bustle to and fro to the various dishes, always inventing some excuse not to sit at the table beside her family. Later that night, when their bedroom lights were put out, and no one was around to see her, she’d make up a small plate of leftovers and eat in the dark. For now, while there were people awake to watch her, people to impress as a hostess, Petunia would at most drain a cup of tea.

After dinner, Petunia asked Lily to help with the clearing up, but it was eight in the evening on a Saturday night, which meant The Two Ronnies was starting. Lily ran the tap over her dirty dish to the strains of Ronnie Corbett, making a joke Lily couldn’t make out about his limited height. Each joke was followed by the boom of her father’s laughter.

“Lily, luv, come in here. You have to see this,” Arnold called.

“I’m helping Petunia in the kitchen, Daddy,” Lily shouted.
“Lily, get in here. You haven’t watched the Ronnies with your father in ages. I miss you.” His second call was interrupted by laughter as another joke was told.

“Just give me a minute!”

“Lily, now!”

Capitulating, Lily dropped the still dirty dish into the sudsy sink and retreated to the living room. She gave Petunia a slight smile as she left. One which was not returned.

“There’s my little girl!” Arnold cheered, when she entered the living room. He held his arm open, so Lily settled on the loveseat beside him, head resting against his shoulder.

Cuddled up together, they watched the next sketch come on. It featured some innuendo that had Lily blushing and squirming with her father so close by. He laughed at her discomfort and tousled her hair. Lily liked watching the telly with her dad, liked their combined attention on one subject. With no light but the telly, shadows played across her father’s face, and Lily wasn’t faking when she looked on his wrinkled visage adoringly.

_The Two Ronnies_ ended and another sketch show took its place, one Lily hadn’t seen before that had her giggling stronger than ever. At one point, Petunia began to vacuum. She tried to take a sweep through the living room, but her father sent her away, shouting about how she could wait to vacuum when it wouldn’t interrupt their evening. Obediently, Petunia retreated with the vacuum to their father’s bedroom.

After two sketch shows, Lily decided she was exhausted from a long trip and ought to go to bed. She kissed her father on the forehead and whispered, “I love you, Daddy.”

“Back at you, luv. So glad you’re home.”

Lily cast her eyes around the familiar living room. Thousands of formative memories bubbled up from every corner: games of hide and seek, playing with the kitschy bric-a-brac that her mother had used for decorating like they were her dolls, peeking out from behind the curtains to spy on the neighbors with Petunia. Every year she left home for ten months, altering in ways that often seemed mysterious and undefinable to her, and every year she returned to a house unchanged.

In a whisper, Lily agreed. “I’m glad I’m home, too.”

And it wasn’t a lie.

Chapter End Notes

_A/N: What's up, fam! Sorry for not really replying to reviews from the last chapter. I read and cherished each one, but life, work, you know. I’m sorry for the torturous back-and-forth here, but I’m a sucker for a fanfic trope, and you know they couldn't just get together and STAY together that easily. Where would be the fun in that? No promises on the update schedule, but I do have the next chapter written and so it will come sometime this summer.

Hope everyone's enjoying the beautiful weather (if it's summer where you are)!_
No matter how Lily tugged at the daisy-patterned curtains that covered her bedroom window, a sliver of light always forced its way through. Lily hated that beam of light. Hated it. She refused to concede to nature’s demand that she get out of bed and face the morning, stubbornly suffocating herself with a pillow rather than face the day.

The sun wasn’t the only enemy of a lazy morning in bed. She’d beaten the snooze button on her alarm clock twice already that morning. In a half-asleep fog, she’d performed some mental calculus: if she forewent her shower and peed at Collier’s, she could sleep another half hour and only be a few minutes late to work. A worthy sacrifice.

It had rained during the night, leaving the room cool and fresh. Lily pulled the sheets tight to her neck, enjoying the silkiness of the fabric against her bare skin. She wasn’t asleep exactly, but something in between that was leagues better than having to walk into town for a shift of scooping ice cream for the town’s screeching (though admittedly adorable) children.

The bedroom door opened with a scream of unoiled hinges. It was a signal to brace herself, and Lily curled tighter, brought the pillow more firmly down over her ears, before the onslaught could begin.

“Lily! How are you still in bed? It’s already…” there was a pause where Petunia presumably checked the time, “…9:30! You should have left by now!”

“I’m sick,” Lily moaned piteously.

Petunia flung the blankets unceremoniously to the floor, and then ripped the pillow away from Lily’s face. Lily blinked owlishly at the day in all its glory. Petunia was dressed in khaki capris and a floral blouse that was so spacious, she could have hid a third-trimester pregnancy beneath it. Make up in place and hair styled, Petunia looked like she’d been awake for hours, and she had. Petunia had risen at six without the prompting of an alarm.

“You’re not sick. Now get out of bed, right now.”

“Sick in the head,” Lily muttered, but she moved as ordered, shuffling to the closet to pick out an outfit.

“I have oatmeal and a banana ready for you in the kitchen. You’ll have to eat fast, but that’s your own fault,” Petunia lectured.

Petunia didn’t leave as Lily slowly dressed, probably not trusting Lily wouldn’t fling herself back into bed at the earliest opportunity. It was like being watched by a prison warden, one with no sympathy for her charges. Petunia ought to fear an uprising.

“I don’t see how you’re going to make it all the way into town before the shop opens,” Petunia
huffed. “I’ll have to drive you.”

“No!” Lily shouted, shocked into jarring wakefulness. “No, I don’t want you to drive me.”

Like hell was she going to allow Petunia to drive her. Being late was loads better than dealing with Petunia’s resentment.

“There’s no other choice, Lily. You saw to that when you decided to laze about all morning.”

“It’ll be fine. I just won’t eat breakfast, and I’ll leave right away,” Lily protested.

It was the ring of death. Petunia viewed it as a personal failing if Lily went an hour hungry, and she narrowed her eyes at the very idea. Over the breakfast Petunia forced down her throat, Lily and Petunia continued to argue. Lily couldn’t accept the idea that Mr. Collier would fire her over a few minutes tardiness. The owner was docile, unambitious, having inherited the shop from his father before him, and the days seemed to melt in front of his unfocused eyes as quickly as the ice cream cones he sold.

Lily didn’t blame him for his complacency. She too found it difficult to glean any excitement at the ice cream shop. Her hours there slipped into a mellow haze, and that Tuesday was no different. Mostly, the store was quiet, just Lily and the mechanical whir of the ice cream machine. It was freezing behind the counter, and Lily would keep her elbows tucked protectively to her sides to try to generate a bit of warmth, all the while gazing out the window at the summer day, which boasted of heat and freedom. During the slow hours, and most hours were slow, she could read – her library card was well-used as she picked up four new books and magazines a week to wile away the time.

It wasn’t a terrible experience. Lily had survived worse summer jobs, but she wasn’t thriving either. There was no inspiration to be found in digging her right arm into a tub of chunky walnut ice cream, and she barely catalogued the smiling, grateful faces.

Walking home that evening, Lily admitted the real problem of her summer: loneliness. The transactional interactions with customers didn’t fulfill her. Mr. Collier spent barely an hour in the store a day, and there were no other summer associates to joke around with. Since her first night, Lily had hardly seen her father, and she had no friends. That left Petunia and Vernon, who (loosely) qualified as people but hardly good conversationalists.

The two lovebirds had a dinner date, so Lily ate a frozen lasagna that Petunia had left out, alone in front of the television. Lily despised who she became with the telly as company. The chat shows, the sketches, and serials were all…pointless. She didn’t learn from them, didn’t grow from staying on her arse for hours at a time. Yet it was so easy to slip into these rhythms, where she lost her entire evening with the lights off and the volume cranked up to drown out the chirping of birds outside.

The TV was so loud that Lily nearly missed the pecking at the kitchen window. Her ear catalogued the repetitive bang against glass, like one of the neighbors were hammering, before her mind could wonder at the noise. A stronger, louder sound, the collision of something heavy with the window drew Lily’s eyes away from the blare of the telly, and she went to investigate.

It was an owl. An owl that had thrown itself bodily at the closed window when she didn’t respond to its politer bid for attention. Lily rushed to unlatch the window and let the frustrated bird inside. She winced as it hopped all over Petunia’s clean countertops with muddy talons. Lily pet absently at the owl’s head as she unfurled her letter, and pressed a bit too hard when she saw the sender.

James! A letter from James! Lily’s heart burst and repaired itself in one wonderful second. Without looking at the contents of the message, Lily pressed her lips to the seal, once, twice, three times.
Then, she decided she couldn’t open something so sacred in the ugly kitchen and raced upstairs to her bedroom. The owl didn’t fly after her but let itself out the window. It meant that James didn’t expect a reply, but Lily didn’t let that worry her.

She flung herself down onto her bed, the pillows flopping about at the intrusion. Delicately, she broke the seal and removed the letter from the envelope. She didn’t rush to read the letter. For all she knew, its contents would be dreadful. Instead, she would take a few moments to wonder at her name on the envelope. James had dotted that I! James had swooped his quill to form the L, the Y! She prolonged the rush of giddiness as long as possible before she relented to her possible rejection.

Dear Lily,

*Please read this letter! You probably don’t want to hear from me after how I acted on the train, and I would understand if you ripped this to shreds without hearing me out. I’m asking that you dig deep into your well of generosity and give my words a fair read before any ripping, shredding, stomping takes place. Okay?*

I’m sorry. Very sincerely sorry. I shouldn’t have been such a coward on the train. Seeing Sirius hurt, well, it hurt me. I panicked. I thought that the best way to be a mate to Sirius was to ignore our connection, give him some time to heal. Cowardice, pure and simple, unworthy of Gryffindor House. Because you and I knew that Sirius would be hurt, and I’d pushed you to hurt him in the first place. Rationalizing before that day on the train was easy, seeing it in reality, however, was something else altogether.

*My instinct is always to protect Sirius. Maybe I give myself too much credit and view myself as the hero, willing to make the noble sacrifice of love in the name of my ideals. I’ve spent the last three weeks arguing with myself. And the truth is, I will always protect Sirius, but his motives have hardly been innocent. There’s something you should know about your relationship with Sirius. Maybe it’s a betrayal of him to tell you, but it’s been a worse betrayal of you and how I feel that I’ve kept this secret for so long.*

It’s not something I can share via letter, so I must ask for a favor, even though I don’t deserve it from you. Let me come by your house to talk. Owl post is too risky. Sirius will notice any mail. So let me see you. Leave a ribbon outside your window if the answer is yes. I’ll see it and come by tomorrow night to talk.

*(I’ll admit that my motives aren’t all selfless. Going months without seeing you has always been the sourest point of my summers. To see your face again will be more than I deserve.)*

*I hope I see your ribbon.*

*James*

Wednesday stretched out endlessly. Her longed-for day off had turned sour. An hour of free time, normally so appreciated, worshipped even, was now just an obstacle to overcome. Lily glared at the clock on Petunia’s bedside table, like she might bully the hands of the clock to move faster. She counted backwards from sixty, but the hand didn’t budget. Time had actually slowed to elongate her torture!

That, or she’d been a bit speedy in her counting. Six seconds later, the clock hand ticked forward by a minute.
Lily didn’t know how to spend her afternoon. Petunia worked Wednesdays as a typist at that drill-firm, the one where she’d met Vernon, so there was no hope for human company. The telly offered no relief as Lily’s romantic imaginings were a thousand times more exciting than Coronation Street. In her current state, reading was entirely out of the question. And, to top it all off, it was raining. Thick and unforgiving, the rain beat her window and warned that she shouldn’t bother searching for solace outside unless she wanted to look like a drowned rat for James.

Not for the first time, Lily wished James had been impolite enough to deny her the choice, that he’d come bursting through her bedroom window without notice. Better an unpleasant surprise than the weight of a wait.

It was nearly noon, and Lily had yet to leave her bed. Her shoulder ached from how she’d slept on it, her body unaccustomed to prolonged sleep. She didn’t have an appetite for food or experience, but Lily forced herself to stand anyway, to march down the stairs and eat a banana in the kitchen. She watched the rain from the window dispassionately.

After that, she spent a half hour stretching. Not the worst choice as the scream of her muscles sometimes managed to drown out the screams in her head. Next, she tried to journal, but that exercise was given up almost immediately as the soppy sweet words of love on the page made her want to chuck up the banana. Lily was still coming to terms with the person James made her, and boy, was this new-Lily desperate. Writing a letter to Mei-Lin proved more fruitful as Lily made sure to avoid any mention of James. Instead, she apologized for abandoning Mei-Lin at the train station without a goodbye, explaining that she’d been distraught after ending things with Sirius. She also layered in a fair bit of flattery, to the tune of Petunia being a hag and Mei-Lin an angel, sweeter than if she’d sprayed the letter with a blast of perfume. And then, she wrote Will as well.

All of this and the clock ticked forward a single hour.

Giving up, Lily laid down on the scratchy carpeting of the living room and blasted the radio. She might as well get up-to-date on the newest music. The music washed over her, soothing if not cleansing her mania, and she tapped both feet to the beat.

Half the afternoon slipped away in this state of uncharacteristic apathy before Lily shot up from her position with a sudden thought. She hadn’t hung the ribbon to signal James!

Finding ribbon wasn’t difficult. Lily’s primary school years had been filled with the fine scraps of fabric tickling the back of her neck. Petunia kept a drawer of hair ties and supplies. Lily stretched out the length of her chosen ribbon, as long as her arm at least and pale blue polyester. She figured it would be good for three solid loops.

Her bedroom window faced out to the street, the yard sparse and lifeless, except for a dying ash tree that had never reached maturity, pathetic and drooping like its roots had never taken. Unobstructed by the tiny tree, Lily could peer out at the row homes on the other side of the street and past that the mill, which loomed large and menacing. Today, with the weather wavering between summer rain and ravaging storm, the view was even more dismal.

Lily battled the window open. The wind forced her hair back and brought with it sheets of rain that wet the sill and her sleep shirt. Unperturbed, Lily leaned out the window, stomach pressed uncomfortably against the pane and set to her work. She hummed as she did so, “Tie a yellow ribbon round the old oak tree…” The romanticism of it, the quaintness, it was pervasive. It almost didn’t fit the scene of her and James. There was something dangerous about them, forbidden, their indiscretions tallying up one after the other, more like this storm than the song she sang, which was sweet, simple. But Lily didn’t mind, found herself consoled by it.
There! Lily leaned back. The ribbon looped around three times like she’d predicted with just enough for the little tufts to dangle. She didn’t know if she liked her work, but it was finished.

She walked away, sat on her bed, but then, the sense that something was wrong nagged at her. The ribbon was a symbol of their appeasement, of their future, their love. It would be the first thing James saw when he arrived at the house. It was dreadfully important, and Lily wanted it to be perfect.

Feeling foolish, Lily pulled on a pair of wellies and marched out into the rain to get a glance at what the ribbon looked like from an outside view. The answer: dreadful. It looked like a big, fat infinity symbol, the trailings of the ribbon sucked up, clenched in. Furious with herself, Lily hurried back upstairs, untied the ribbon and set to work anew. In the end, it would take four tries and a house full of wet footprints before she was satisfied with her work. A perfectly tied ribbon. She felt that all her love for James could be seen in the way she’d carefully folded the creases, that he would recognize her feelings once he caught sight of it, know that he was forgiven.

When Petunia saw the ribbon that evening, she harrumphed. She assumed it was some sort of hippie symbol that Lily had adopted. Rather drolly, Petunia asked if was meant to be a war sign: “Pro or anti,” she sneered at Lily. She didn’t bother to specify the war: Eritrea? Guatemala? Mozambique? Naturally, Lily couldn’t tell her sister the truth. It suited her far better to let Petunia think she was sending a message to the entire neighborhood about peace and justice, so, with a sneer of her own, Lily answered, “Anti.”

By eight, the rain had stopped, and its absence left a void of sound that set Lily on edge. Every time a car door slammed or a dog barked, Lily jolted. The exodus of the storm had also brought back the sun, stubbornly high in the sky, like it was trying to make up for lost time. Worse, it warded off the night and James’ promised arrival.

Another man came also calling for the Evans girls that night: Vernon.

Petunia’s boyfriend had a penchant for the dramatic entrance. Despite his heft, the shiny patch of forehead at his hairline always preceded him into any room. He would barrel forward with his neck craned, forehead and darting eyes entering long before the body would follow. Then, Vernon would shout his greetings to Petunia and the household. Lily reckoned Vernon was never just speaking to Petunia but angling for an audience, the rest of the family, possibly the neighbors. His voice wasn’t just booming but echoed; Vernon was fully aware of the effect upon his audience.

Lily sat at the kitchen table, idly spinning her spoon through a gone-cold cup of tea. Through the slender passage between the kitchen and the landing, Lily could just see Petunia lean up to kiss Vernon on the mouth. Only his moustache was visible to her. The couple were dressed for a night out. Lily wanted to chase them out onto the street, one less obstacle to James’ arrival. Alas, Petunia walked into the kitchen with Vernon in tow.

“We’re going to be out for a few hours at least. Don’t go anywhere without leaving a note and don’t get up to any funny business,” Petunia ordered.

Lily continued to ponder her tea. “Okay, mom.”

“And don’t make one of those disgusting concoctions of yours. You’ll ruin my pots and pans if you don’t burn the house down altogether,” Petunia continued.

This earned a direct glare from Lily, and it was now Petunia’s turn to petulantly ignored her sister’s eyes, fiddling with a loose thread on her sleeve. “I haven’t done that since I was nine!”

Petunia was, of course, referring to Lily’s childish potions experiments. Still years away from buying
a wand, Lily had wanted desperately to prepare for her magical education. She would quiz Severus relentlessly about the various subjects, and she’d decided upon Potions as the easiest to replicate outside of school. After all, it was just cooking. Lily’s first foray into potions went something like this: two spoons of sugar, half a bag of flower, shredded dandelions plucked from the garden, a couple slices of ham (meant to represent a dragon’s liver), and an entire jar of honey. The ingredients were stirred into a sticky, vomit-inducing substance and then popped into the oven to cook for three hours. Petunia had rushed in and thrown it – pan and all – into the sink once the smoke started to pipe out and clog the air. Obviously, she’d never lived it down.

“We have a reservation. I don’t have time to stand around and argue with you,” Petunia said.

“Then go,” Lily muttered, but at the last moment she managed a smile to soften the words.

Petunia’s face journeyed in much the same way, from grimace to an insincere but trying smile. At her shoulder, Vernon waited red-faced and tight-lipped. It wasn’t natural for Vernon to remain silent for a long stretch like this, but he was achingly uncomfortable around Lily and had yet to sort how to act around her. Even something as simple as greeting Lily by name became a chore for Vernon. ‘Lily’ felt too familiar, ‘Evans’ too odd since she shared her surname with Petunia, and anything denoting a familial relationship like ‘sister’ was phony and liable to send both Lily and Petunia scowling at him. So far, Vernon had settled for a falsely jovial, “Hello, you,” when he felt silence was inappropriate. Whenever Petunia wasn’t in the room to catch her at it, Lily couldn’t resist winding Vernon up by repeating his Christian name over and over again at the tail of each sentence. Few people could turn as red as Vernon Dursley.

Lily watched as Vernon’s sedan pulled away from the curb and rounded the corner out of sight. Something almost like fondness for the man welled up in her, since he’d done the kindness of getting Petunia out of the house. All day, Lily had been a mess of nerves, but now, she felt a foreign calm settle upon her. James would come. He would come and say whatever he had to say, and there was no point in worrying the hours away until then.

Lily went outside, into the narrow yard, and laid down upon the grass. The grass dampened her skin, and there was a thin layer of mud beneath that painted the back of her calves brown. Lying there, Lily could watch as the sun slowly yielded to the earth’s rotation, slowly sank away. She was almost swallowed whole by the sense of “home” that enveloped her as she peered up at the sky, the same sky as anywhere else, except marked by the Cokeworth industrial line, by the smells of her town.

Something crashed behind her, and Lily sat up to look for the commotion. It was coming from the house, from her bedroom, the window now conspicuously open. Lily smiled widely and raced into the house, took the steps two at a time, and burst into her bedroom.

She almost knocked James over with her fervor. James had flown down, his broom hovering by the window. Lily spotted him in the process of trying to flatten his momentous hair. The wind had whipped it into a worse torrent than usual. He dropped his hands immediately when he spotted her, froze.

“Hi,” James said.

“Hi.” When James didn’t say anything, overcome by an awkwardness that didn’t suit him, Lily forged ahead, “That was one romantic letter, Potter. No one’s ever said just seeing my face is something they might not deserve before.”

James huffed a disbelieving laugh. The first time they’d seen him in weeks, and she opened by teasing him. Lily enjoyed watching some of the tension drain from his body.
“I wasn’t sure you’d want to talk to me…er, to see me,” James admitted.

“Yeah, well, you said you knew some secrets, and I can’t resist those,” Lily said.

“Right, Sirius’s secret…”

Lily decided to take pity on him, deserving or not, and leaned forward so that she could take James’ larger hand in her own. “And I couldn’t resist the chance to see your face either. I’ve missed you. A lot.”

She might as well have headbutted him in the stomach for all the effect she caused, the breath whooshing out of James. Then, he powered her into a hug that said everything the letter had tried to convey in so many words. His nose buried in her throat, and she could hear him sucking in deep breaths of her; she would smell like grass and English Breakfast. To Lily, he just smelled like James.

“I’m really sorry, Lil. I shouldn’t have run. I care about you so much,” he murmured into her throat.

“I know why you did it,” Lily said. “I wasn’t prepared for how much it would hurt to see Sirius like that either. I put us in an impossible situation. There was no right thing to do.”

“There’s always a right thing to do,” James said.

Lily pulled away, frowning, “Not always, James.”

Ignoring her, James said, “I’ve been thinking about it all summer, and the situation is more complicated than just, mate steals best mate’s girl. That would be wrong, full-stop, but there’s more to it than that.”

Released entirely from Lily’s arms, James began to pace. Her room was too small for more than a few steps in either direction, so he swiveled on his heel every few seconds to reverse directions.

“Tell me,” Lily ordered.

With a great breath to steel himself, and looking her dead in the eyes, James told her. “Sirius didn’t date you because he liked you. He had another reason —” Lily braced herself to hear that they’d both lied to her over and over, that she’d been a pawn in their fight all along. Lily wasn’t sure she would be able to forgive James that. So many lies straight to her face, all that trust destroyed. “—He did it to bother his family.”

“What?”

“All those howlers you got, that was the point. He has no contact with them, and he hasn’t even seen his mum since last summer. But, he knew that, disowned or not, his mum couldn’t ignore him dating a…a…”

“Mudblood,” Lily supplied as the blood drained from her cheeks and arms, leaving her tingling and cold.

“No! No! Don’t say that, please. Knowing that your parents were muggles,” James said. He grabbed her by the elbows again as he spoke with all that characteristic James fierceness, like she might actually believe she was garbage because of her parents. Truthfully, she was nearly numb to it. The word didn’t hurt, would never hurt again. There was only ever that initial fissure of shock that someone could care about something so arbitrary in the first place; it would flare up with a light sting at the reminder only to settle down again.
“Sirius told you that?” Lily asked, purposefully avoiding James’ desperate gaze.

“He didn’t have to.”

Lily sat down on the edge of her bed and thought. She restructured her relationship with Sirius piece by piece. Looking through this new perspective, she could see the truth of it. Accompanying her to Astronomy hadn’t been a whim, it was intentional, to introduce her to Regulus. The way he’d laughed at her howlers, never asked her how they made her feel was because he was too busy delighting in the attention, at his scheme’s success.

“I wanted to kill him after they started bothering you, or at least tell you. It wasn’t right, Lily,” James said.

There he went again with “right,” like any of them had a clue what they were doing in this mess. From where Lily was sitting, there were no innocents. She couldn’t even be angry at Sirius, not really. She had seen the vulnerable heart of him and understood what would make him do such a thing. Somewhere inside the initial disgust was sympathy.

“Why didn’t you tell me, then?”

“Because…it wasn’t right, but I wasn’t sure what the right thing to do was either.”

“It’s not like my motives were all that honest either,” Lily said gently. She ought to feel vindicated of any guilt for the role she played, but she didn’t. Not at all.

James dropped to his knees before the bed. It was a pose of supplication, so that he could peer up at her and beg forgiveness. Even then, he was tall enough that his eyeline was parallel with her neck. Competing loyalties and secrets must have been eating away at him these past months. His black-and-white moral thinking wouldn’t allow for easy answers in such a situation, and Lily couldn’t blame him for keeping his secrets. She was many things, but rarely a hypocrite.

“Oh, stand up,” Lily huffed, yanking at the collar of his jumper. “I’m not angry with you. All’s forgiven, so just stand up.”

James did so, legs wobbling like a fawn. “How do you do that?”

“What?”

“Forgive so easily?”

Rather than deigning that humiliatingly kind question with an answer, Lily inspected James. He’d dressed appropriately as a muggle. It would have been hilarious had he dressed in robes and ran into Petunia, but she would trade the laughs for a chance to look at him. James had a chameleon-like appeal: the glasses and jumper lended him the appeal of the intellectual, the jeans and lovely curve of his bum signaled to his athleticism, and his tousled hair spoke of naughty ways they might defile her bedroom together. He wasn’t overwhelmingly handsome necessarily, not in the way of Sirius, but he exuded an aliveness that would arrest the viewer, and Lily was no different.

“Have I ever told you that you’re like, really fit?” Lily asked.

James barked a laugh. “No! At least not in words. Your eyes are another story.”

“Really?” Lily giggled, something she apparently did when James was concerned and the specter of drama had been lifted from them.
“Lily, the whole school’s known you think I’m fit since fifth year. I swear, one day you were glaring at me, like I’d kicked your dog, and the next day, you were eye-fucking me in Charms. We’re frankly lucky I didn’t die of euphoria on the spot. It was a close call what with the shock of it,” James said.

“I was not looking at you like that,” Lily said, and then amended, “In fifth year.”

“Trust me, your face telegraphs your every thought. There was plenty of glaring, too, but you also wanted me,” James said, smugly.

“Delusional.”

Only, Lily was pretty sure she’d noticed James’ lovely eyes in fifth year, and there was some merit to his claims. Thinking back, her arguments with Severus, where she’d squawk indignantly at the very idea that she might like him, question where he came up with such a thing, took on a new tinge of futility. If she was “eye-fucking” James in class, Severus certainly would have taken notice.

Complimenting James was a magic spell in its own right, and he’d returned to his normal arrogant self. James’ chest puffed out with satisfaction, and he peacocked around the room, striking poses with an increasing lack of subtlety, to encourage her to look at him.

He bent over at her dresser, which pointed his arse aggressively in her direction. Lily shrieked in horror and laughter and chucked a slipper at him. James took the blow without dignity, standing tall to rub at his bum and pretending to cry. It was odd to see him, someone who belonged so definitively to Hogwarts, standing in her bedroom. None of her school supplies were visible as Petunia made her lock it all up in the truck under her bed during the holidays, so it was just James surrounded by the muggle.

Having realized the same thing – that he was in Lily’s bedroom – James gave up his modeling to survey her things. The bedroom was a retrospective on Lily, a curated museum in miniature.

The most impressive feature was the dresser. A first wedding anniversary present her father had custom-built with his own two hands. It stood at over 3 meters tall. It was vivisected into three parts, the lower portion divided into two, so that on the left were drawers and on the right a wardrobe to hang dresses and coats. Above both the cherry oak hollowed out into three rows of shelving. The sisters shared, so Lily’s things had been relegated to the upper shelf, but she’d made good use of it. Battered and well-read volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica (she owned A-G); a collection of rocks that she’d found on her travels through town, each one categorized, a piece of scotch tape with their name in marker to identify them; a photograph of the Evans family, complete and alive, at Lily’s christening; framed beside it was another picture, this one cut from a newspaper of Barbara Castle with the triumphant headline “Castle And Ford Women Victory: Equal Pay To Be A Reality!”

James noticed the treasure trove of Lily at his fingertips as well and turned to perusing her belongings. His fingers trailed the spine of her books, he weighed her precious stones in her hand, and respectfully nodded to the picture of the Evans family. Unnervingly, Lily’s notes on the Grindylows investigation were also on the shelf, hidden away in a notebook that James could easily flip open and discover, but he didn’t, moving onto Petunia’s shelves instead.

“You know, I was hoping for something a little more telling,” James commented.

“How so?”

“A diary. Doodles of my name. Maybe some clothes girlishly tossed about, so I can better imagine you up here in your down time. I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about you over the summers, what
you’d get up to, lying in bed and imagining you doing the same. This just isn’t what I imagined.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” Lily said, but at the same time, she shucked off one of her socks, allowing it to drop coyly to the floor, some would even say it had been ‘girlishly tossed about.’ James recognized what she’d done immediately and burst into that unfaltering laugh he had.

“How is this woman? Not your mum?” James said, tapping the picture of Barbara Castle.

It was her turn to laugh. “No, not my mum! That’s Barbara Castle. She’s the longest-serving woman MP in the House of Commons – err…like the Wizengamont. She’s served since 1945? 46? Something like that, and she’s accomplished a lot. Muggle men can be, you know, skeptical of women, so to get elected, all the women in the Blackburn Labour Party had to threaten a strike, otherwise they would have only put men on the ballot. And, in 1970, after the women at the Ford plant went on strike – they were being paid only half of what the men were making, can you believe it? – she pushed through the Equal Pay Act of 1970.”

James whistled, less because he was impressed by her achievements than marveling at the follies of muggle sexism. Personally, Lily believed wizards were too quick to give themselves a pass on that very subject. Yes, the first female Minister of Magic had been elected in the sixteenth century, and yes, there were fewer institutional barriers, but Lily recognized little differences in how boys and girls were treated at Hogwarts all the time, and she figured that translated into real world differences as well.

“My father votes Tory, so I thought he was going to have a fit when I first put up the picture, but she wrote this white paper, *In Place of Strife*, where she talks about limiting union powers, so my father actually figures she’s one of the only bearable Labour MPs. Petunia takes it down during the year, of course. I found it hidden under the sink in the loo.”

“It always freaks me out, the way they don’t move. It’s like the portrait was petrified,” James said, waving his hand in front of the frame, like it might cause Barbara Castle’s eyes to snap sideways to his.

Not wanting to ruin the mood, Lily kept her opinion to herself. If her mum’s picture could walk and talk, Lily would waste her life away sitting before it, unable to make the distinction between the real and the magical. How anyone processed loss when the talking images of their loved ones were accessible was beyond her.

Instead, she said, “I like seeing you in here. The collision of worlds. It’s always bothered me how separate my magical and muggle lives are. It’s like I’ve got a big old Berlin Wall dividing my life, and you’ve come in and knocked it down.”

“You like seeing me stand in your bedroom? How about if I sit on your bed?” James said, dropping down beside her, so that their thighs brushed. His eyebrows waggled lecherously.

Lily almost spit she laughed so abruptly. “God! Don’t ever try to seduce me again. That’s awful.”

“Try? Try!” James protested. “There is no try. If I decide to seduce you, you will be seduced!”

“How did that go for you in fifth year, hmm?” Lily countered.

“I wasn’t trying in fifth year. I knew you weren’t ready for it. I took mercy on you.”

Lily spun around on the bed, so that she was facing him. Her legs spread, so that her knees might cradle his hips. With one hand, she rubbed the front of his jumper. The material was soft and expensive, somewhat unfamiliar. She suspected it was made from the fur of one of the magical
creatures that the Potters cared for. James tensed up at the unexpected contact, like she knew he would. Lily knew exactly what she was doing.

“Evans, have the tables turned? Are you trying to seduce me?” James asked lowly.

Lily continued to look at the sweater caught between her fingertips. “Depends.”

“On?”

“Whether that’s something you’d want.”

Now, Lily didn’t permit herself to look at him. She couldn’t read him, but she would allow the vulnerability of him reading her. She needed him to know what was at stake. Her pride, and worse, her heart, couldn’t take yet another where James turned away from her. If he was going to go down this path with her, he needed to be all in. No more excuses.

Trying to convey all of this, Lily held her eyes unnaturally wide. The tips of her eyelashes brushed against her browbone. Unknowingly, her fingers curled more tightly around his jumper. Even as she offered him an out, she was clinging to him.

“It is, Lily. It is,” James whispered.

And, whether James deserved it or not, Lily trusted him. She trusted him wholeheartedly.

Propriety still said wait. So did common sense and a whole host of other things that Lily shoved ruthlessly to the back of her mind because she would no longer be weighted down by the waiting. Ten tons of repression and guilt flew away as she sailed forward into the arms and unyielding body of the man she loved.

Flush, chest-to-chest, heaving with the dizzying freedom of it, Lily crushed James’ mouth to hers with a vigor that denied gentle metaphors. Winding through her loose hair, James held her close, and Lily fought to do the same, using his shoulders to erase any distance between them. James’ mouth was warm and wet, slick in a way that drew attention to the mess between her thighs.

James was leaning haphazardly on his elbows, Lily’s weight requiring him to brace himself. When she let up for just a second, James took collapsed back onto the bed. Lily, laughingly, tried to follow him down, but he evaded her with a laugh of his own, maneuvering so that he could lie comfortably against the pillows.

Now, he tugged her down, slotted their long bodies together, so that she could explore the lines of him. And, James was all lines, angular and lean, made up of planes and plateaus that she could trace with her fingers. They never stopped kissing as Lily trailed her hands first down his jumper and then back up again, this time beneath the fabric. He would tremble beneath her gentle touch, flexing the hard-earned muscles of his chest. Simultaneously, James was doing the same to her, feeling her sides and scratching along the hem of her pajama bottoms, but she took no notice, too eager to explore.

Around his nipples he sported wiry black hair. Curiously, Lily pressed first her fingertip and then her nails along the tiny nubs. James groaned and cursed hotly into her mouth, so Lily did it again and again, until his hips were raised completely off the bed at the torture.

Lily wanted his shirt off with such force that she was surprised an accidental burst of magic didn’t remove it. Instead, James did it himself. Lily broke the kiss to peer down at her hands on his skin, to watch as they made their slow and languorous journey along his stomach. Lily had always felt the center of her sensuality was captured in her hands; they brought her pleasure regularly after all, and she delighted in offering them to someone else. In eighteenth century Italy, a pair of unblemished
white hands were seen as the ultimate in beauty, and Lily could see the appeal as she watched herself touching James.

“You’re so beautiful,” Lily murmured, and the sentiment was wrenched straight from her soul.

“You’re stealing my line,” James teased.

“Then, you should have said I was beautiful sooner. But, it seems I have to do all the work,” Lily said.

She was still pretending to sigh in disappointment, when James grabbed her hips and flipped her over. Lily squealed, though it wasn’t honestly all that unexpected. What was surprising was that he didn’t settle her onto her back with him on top, but rather laid her down on her stomach, with him hovering a few centimeters above. The denial of his body, knowing it was so near, was as erotic as feeling the full of him. Lily breathed wetly into her pillow, waiting for him to do…anything.

Then, so gently she might have missed it, James shifted her hair away from her neck and shoulder, unearthing bare skin on her right-side. Lily sighed dreamily as cool air brushed her skin. The air was, shortly thereafter, replaced with the barest trail of fingers as James traced from the shell of her ear to the dip of her clavicle. Lily shuddered. James mouth lowered, so that she could feel the hot sweep of his breath along the line his finger traced. Lily trembled. And then, a wet kiss behind her ear, right where the nerves bundled together. Lily keened.

“James, I need you to –”

Lily’s aborted plea for anything, anything went answered as James’ looped an arm beneath her bodies, so that he could press up between her legs, over the fabric of her pajamas. Having been on her stomach all this time, tenderly pressed into the mattress, Lily was already primed, already ready. James’ lips attacked her neck in earnest, and Lily abandoned herself to the sensation. He was so good and attentive and hers, hers, hers.

Lily broke. She broke into pieces, and James, with his hard body, was right there to put her back together again. Her moans were hardly muffled by the pillow, and they transformed her bedroom from a relic of her childhood into something else altogether. Never again would she be able to sit on her bed in the dark and escape back to the feeling of being a girl again. The room had been corrupted, in the best of ways, by James.

Limp as a doll, Lily let James maneuver her onto her back again. His attitude completely changed, he pecked her on the tip of her nose. Somehow that simple, innocent gesture brought a blush to her cheeks.

“You’re beautiful, Lily,” James said, lips curling at a chance to take his “line” back.

Slowly coming back to herself, Lily said, “That’s sweet. I hope you realize we’re not done here, though.”

“We’re not?”

“Do you feel done?” Lily countered, managing to keep a loony laugh from escaping.

James returned to kissing her, and their passion blocked out all else: the night blanketing the sky, the street lights flickering on one by one, and the gravel crunch as a 1975 British Leyland – the kind with the unseemly lump over the engine because the driver couldn’t afford the premium model – parked in front of the curb.
The weight of Lily’s clothes felt increasingly stifling. James played with the hem of her shirt, teasing it up and then down without ever exposing higher than her belly button. Those barely-there touches set Lily off giggling in spite of herself. She wanted to be sexy, to lean into James, but instead, her body instinctively tried to escape the tickling. And James, smiling, chased her.

That’s how Petunia found them: James, a strange shirtless boy on top of her sister, who was laughingly running from his kisses and hands.

When the bedroom door flung open, and Lily was faced with not just Petunia but Vernon to boot, there was a lot of screaming. Petunia screamed. Lily screamed. James screamed. The only person with a modicum of control throughout was Vernon, who turned the shade of a squeezed tomato and averted his eyes, like Lily had been naked and giving a lap dance as opposed to fully dressed in her frumpy pajamas.

“You must be joking?” Petunia said, recovering far faster than the illicit couple.

James scrambled off of Lily, having stayed perched above her a beat too long, and yanked his jumper on backwards. Somehow, amidst the general panic, Lily recognized that James’ jumper was on inside out as well, but she didn’t have the voice to correct him. Her dignified, judgmental sister had just caught her dry humping a boy in their shared childhood bedroom. Lily would be lucky if Petunia didn’t post wanted pictures of James around the neighborhood.

“Didn’t you just break up with your boyfriend? And already you’re…what’s wrong with you? What must Vernon think?” Petunia said, the questions unleashed in such quick succession that Lily couldn’t hope to answer them.

Ideally, James would have kept his mouth firmly shut and let the sisters battle it out. Vernon certainly knew that was the best option as he was still staring through her bedroom like it was a hypnotizing void, focusing on nothing and no one.

James, of course, didn’t know the first thing about the fraught Evans sisters, so he decided – shirt now on again – that he might take the moment to introduce himself. Bounding off the bed, he approached Petunia. He practically loomed over her, and Petunia was shocked to the point that she momentarily forgot her outrage. Then, her lips pursed and her overprotective instincts came roaring back to life.

“James Potter.” He offered a hand that was completely ignored.

Instead, Petunia turned to Vernon, “I’m so sorry. I hadn’t begun to predict something like this…”

“Don’t talk to him like I’m not here!” Lily hissed indignantly.

“You think I’m going to simply not address this indecency? In my house? I’ll not have Vernon thinking we’re some kind of…kind of…”

Lily burst from the bed, looping an elbow through James’ as she drew parallel. “I’ll tell Vernon what he ought to think. Vernon —” And being addressed so boldly finally shocked Vernon into looking at Lily, darkened his complexion even more so, and sent him stepping backwards, like he might escape her altogether. “—this is James. My boyfriend. We broke up right before the term ended, but we’ve just now gotten back together. He came to apologize, and we were simply…making up.”

The lie was out of her mouth before she could process it. It was a minor lie, a white lie, at that, but Lily still wanted to kick herself. Lying had really become a habit of late. Yet, she couldn’t admit to Petunia that she’d moved from one boy to another in the course of a few weeks. Worse, she couldn’t
admit that she’d already been developing her relationship with James while Sirius was still in the picture. Petunia would go into cardiac arrest.

“Um, yes, yes. I was a twat before the holidays. Lily was right to chuck me, but I came here to win her back, and she’s agreed,” James said. Only a few seconds passed between Lily’s lie and James kindly picking it up.

“And?” Petunia demanded.

Now, Lily shuffled embarrassedly from foot to foot. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, how do you suppose it makes a difference? I’m twenty, and I’ve never had Vernon in this bedroom. Certainly not for that,” Petunia said.

“I won’t do it again?” Lily tried.

Petunia crossed her arms. “Downstairs the both of you. You’ll sit on the couch – with a cushion between you, please! – while we wait for Dad to come home. Then, he’ll deal with you both.”

Twenty minutes later and hardly a word had been said between the unsuited foursome. James and Lily sat, as Petunia had instructed, with a cushion of empty space between them, Petunia sat in the low armchair by the telly, and Vernon hovered nervously in the background. It was the longest Lily had ever heard James go without speaking outside of an exam setting, and she was counting the seconds until he broke entirely.

Vernon, who had been pretending to be a statue for much of the past half hour, finally abandoned his stillness in favor of shuffling about behind them. The noise at her back set Lily’s animal instincts on edge, and the hairs on the back of her neck stood at attention. She could hear Vernon’s keys jingling in his pockets and took it as a sign that he wanted to leave.

Sure enough, Vernon said a moment later, “Petunia, it seems you have a busy night ahead of you, what with this disgrace. Very fine of you to take it in hand, Petunia. Very fine indeed. But, this is a women’s matter. Yes, a womanly matter, and I can see my presence will only hinder you.”

Lily almost snorted at Vernon’s overly-dignified speech. He couldn’t form such pretty words quickly, so there were long, weighty pauses where no weight was necessary as he hunted down the best word on the subject. Knowing Petunia’s tastes, Vernon had fashioned himself into his fancy of an Austen protagonist, but Lily saw only the blowhard Mr. Collins. If his manners fooled her sister though, there was nothing Lily could say on the subject. Not least of all because she’d be lucky if Petunia didn’t nail her into the bedroom after this.

“Oh, no, Vernon! You couldn’t be a bother. Stay! I’ll make tea,” Petunia pleaded, rising up, so that she could pet at Vernon’s arms.

Daringly, James took this opportunity to scoot five precious centimeters to his left. Having been too cowed by Petunia to even sneak a glance at James since they sat down, Lily now copied his bravery and looked him in the eyes, which he immediately crossed, tongue lolling out of his mouth. She almost didn’t manage to smother her laugh.

Despite Petunia’s best efforts, Vernon did not stay to see how James and Lily were to be chastised. This left Petunia helplessly straddling the foot of the front door, so that she could see Vernon off and keep Lily in her sights at all times. When Petunia closed the door, Lily could feel her sister’s crossness had magnified by one hundred. Petunia was perfectly furious at the destruction of her evening.
And, James... James chose that moment to speak up, “So is that a telly, then? Could we turn it on? I’ve always wanted to see what muggles watch on these. Can the moving pictures have a conversation with you like a portrait, or is it not alive in the same way?”

“Err, no, it’s pre-recorded. Not alive at all,” Lily said lowly, like Petunia might somehow not hear this illicit conversation.

As if on cue, Petunia shrieked, “No, no you cannot watch the telly! You cannot come into my house, put your hands all over my little sister, and then switch on the telly! You’re lucky I don’t call the police on you.”

“Why would the police be involved? We’re both seventeen.”

Lily’s sensible point was the last thing that Petunia wanted to hear. Rather than capitulate, Petunia launched into a sermon on loose morals, the slackening values of the neighborhood, and Lily’s personal brand of wickedness. James listened all but slack-jawed, though internally he morphed rapidly between humor and intimidation, then back again. He would not like to be caught in a dark-alley without his wand with Petunia Evans.

All of Petunia’s yelling masked the sound of Arnold Evans returning from work. When he came through the front door, Lily immediately straightened in her seat and folded her hands like a schoolgirl. Everything would depend on how many beers he’d had at the pub and how many arguments he’d had at the mill. Lily hunted for signs of both on his weary, line-worn face.

“What’s all this?” Arnold said after a moment of uncomprehending observation.

“James Potter. I go to school with and, well, date your daughter,” James said immediately, like he was hoping to circumvent Petunia. He came around the couch and politely offered Arnold his hand.

“I didn’t know Lily had a boyfriend. Did you, Pet?”

“It seems they’ve only just gotten back together,” Petunia said.

“That’s why I came by,” James explained, “to apologize for the row we had at the end of term.”

“Well, she must not have been expecting you. Lily, you’re still in your pajamas. Why don’t you change?” her father asked. Relaxing into the strange scene in his living room, Arnold removed his jacket and bent over to untie his work boots. They were thrown indiscriminately to the side by the door, and Petunia hurried to straighten them into a line beside the other shoes.

“Dad, I actually wanted to talk to you about these two,” Petunia said, and Lily felt her mouth go dry. “I came home with Vernon and found them upstairs in Lily’s bedroom. With the door closed.”

Lily waited miserably for Petunia to finish her story, to explain that Lily had been on the bed, while James had been on her, a story that would send Arnold Evans shouting loud enough to wake the neighbors. Only, it didn’t come. Lily looked confusedly up at Petunia, but her sister kept her chin stubbornly raised.

A rush of pure, unadulterated love shot through Lily’s veins. This was the Petunia that she adored, the sister who played the mum when Lily needed it, who provided both discipline and a band aid to the knee when Lily fell off her bike.

“Is this true, Lily?” her father asked severely.

“Yes, Daddy,” Lily said without a hint of contriteness. Her smile was beatific as she tried to signal
her gratitude to Petunia.

“If I may, sir,” James stepped in. “Like I said earlier, Lily and I left things on poor terms, so I came over here to grovel for forgiveness. Your daughter is a wonderful person, and I’m lucky just to know her. I didn’t mean to intrude, and I can understand if you’re concerned about your daughter being alone with me. I’m more than happy to clear out if that’s what you wish.”

In the moment of silence that passed, Lily thought she could follow her father’s mental calculus, the system on which James would be ranked and assessed: good muscles, meaning he was athletic and took part in sport; clean, unflashy clothes, meaning good breeding; polite to his elders, meaning… polite to his elders. Several positives trying to outweigh the glaring issue that he’d been alone with Lily in her bedroom.

“Well you’re right there,” Arnold said finally. “Most boys would be too afraid to come groveling to a girl. Would think it makes them weak.”

"My mum taught me to go after what I want, and my dad told me that I should always trust in love, so here I am. I take my parents' advice very seriously," James said.

No one took notice of the little spasm that shook Lily’s body. He’d said love. He hadn’t said love before.

"Fewer and fewer kids these days do," Arnold grumbled, casting his suspicious eyes over at Lily and Petunia, like they made it a habit of disobeying him.

"Well, I believe that children owe something to their parents, for everything they sacrifice," James said.

Disbelieving, Lily's loyalties temporarily aligned with Petunia's, and Lily leaned in to whisper in her sister's ear, "He's laying it on a bit thick, don't you think?"

"It's like watching you go at a jar of marmalade, just pouring the whole thing out," Petunia snickered back.

When Lily returned her attention to the men, they had switched topics to what James' parents did for a living and after that, Arnold Evans was hooked. If there was one thing that could drag their father from the mire of his joyless daily routines, it was the prospect of magic. From the first day he heard of Hogwarts, he'd been fascinated at the prospect of a more exciting life than had ever been afforded him. James' lifestyle, filled with magical creatures, potions, and money was custom-built to thrill.

And that was that.

Later, Lily would overhear Petunia ranting on the phone – presumably to Vernon as no one else could rightly stand her – that Lily was spoiled, favored, never asked to lift a finger and served up her every desire on a silver tray that Petunia would be expected to wash. Petunia had never dared have a boy in her room, not even Vernon, and she was twenty! Their father would never have stood for it.

And yet, miraculously, he took to James like a long lost son. Before James left that evening, Lily's father showed him his beer cap collection, shared several dirty jokes that left Lily blushing, and shook James hand as a dear friend.

When Lily walked James politely to the door at the end of the evening, James left with not just Lily's forgiveness but the express wish of her father to drop by any time he might please. Lily shut the front door behind them both, sure that Petunia would be snooping on their goodbye. The air was warm, but it smelled like cool rain, tricking her body into a minute shiver.
"My father's absolutely in love with you. I don't know how you did it," Lily murmured in disbelief.

James twined both their hands together and then swung them back a few times as he spoke. "Nah, he loves you, and he admires me for my good taste."

"You have shown good taste," Lily agreed. "Me, and then Emmeline, Danyal..."

"Lily Evans, I will murder you and bury you in the backyard if you keep that up, and your father will take my side when the aurors come investigating," James warned.

Before he could become truly outraged, and Lily had no doubt that the anger was rising in him, she pecked him twice on the cheek. "I was just teasing. I'm not jealous of anyone else anymore. Not after today."

"Good. Because I figure you're my girlfriend."

"Good. Because I figure you're my boyfriend," Lily parroted, giving him one more quick peck to cement the deal. James' fingers clenched tight around hers for a few seconds before releasing, and then he kissed her like he wanted to burn her mouth.

Afterwards, foreheads notched together so that his minty breath bounced off her face, James said, "Lily, you can expect me to take your dad up on his offer."

"What?" Lily asked stupidly, wondering whether her father had invited James to a football game when she wasn't paying attention.

"I'm going to be dropping by...any time I want."

And, as James walked away, Lily thought that “any time” couldn't come soon enough.

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