(The Completely Unwilling Participants on) The Bachelor

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Summary

The title says it all.

Notes

Welcome to our Bachelor AU. It's long and silly, like cgner (who is very tall). This story has eight proper chapters, plus a prologue and an epilogue. Chapters go up every Monday.

Cheers to Karaline, our wonderful beta, who read through this monster fic in one weekend.

Merry early Christmas, everyone!
"But I don't want to be on *The Bachelor,*" Lily said.

"Why not?" said Rufus, leaning back in his pretentious leather chair to better observe her. Its legs squeaked ominously against the floor. "You've already said that you're done with internet dating. Aren't you due for a change of tack?"

He was right, technically. Lily had used that exact term in conversation with a colleague the other day, though why her boss felt it prudent to listen in on her conversations and present them to her as supporting evidence for his mad scheme was beyond her comprehension.

"Changing tack would mean speed dating," she pointed out, "or… letting a friend set me up with someone, not making a spectacle out of myself on *national television.*"

"Well, luckily for you, you won't be there to snag a mate—"

"Snag a mate?"

"—you'll be there for an exposé, and who doesn't love a good exposé?"

Lily could have sworn that she'd been hired on a promise of better assignments than this, but all she'd seemed to pick up since she'd joined the writing staff of *The Daily Prophet* were fluff pieces and entertainment editorials, hardly the hard-hitting political takedowns she'd once dreamed of. Rufus Scrimgeour, whether he'd admit it or not, was a fan of old-school misogyny, and tended to set his female writers to less stimulating tasks than their male colleagues.

It had been pissing Lily off for a long time, but while she secretly searched for a new job at a better publication, her bills still had to be paid. Thus, there she was, with the prospect of an undercover investigation finally before her, but he'd gone and assigned her this.

"If it's an exposé on something that matters," she said, running a hand through her loose, wavy red hair, "like human trafficking, or child abuse scandals in the church, then sure, but you're talking about an asinine reality show. Who would even care about that?"

"Plenty, I'd imagine. Our readers don't get their kicks from human trafficking—"

"Nobody should."

"Look, Lily," Rufus said flatly. "It's not a request, but a necessity at this point. I've already had word from a friend that Rita Skeeter liked your application and wants to meet with you."

"What application?"

"The application I wrote and sent in on your behalf."

"What—"

"It presents you in a most excellent light, I assure you."

"Does it present me in a *consenting* light?"

"Aren't I seeking your consent at this very moment?"
"It doesn't count if it's after the fact," she weakly protested. "Why have I been put forward for this? Why not Heather? Or Amy? She'd be well up for this kind of thing."

"Maybe so, but I felt that you have a particular set of skills that make you better suited to the task."

That was so patently ridiculous that Lily almost laughed outright. Particular set of skills. Who did he think she was, Liam Neeson? "If that's some poorly-disguised reference to my looks—"

"I never said that, nor will you ever hear it fall from my lips."

"But that's what you're implying?"

Rufus tossed his head, pointing his snubbed nose toward the ceiling. "I'm not getting hauled up before any sexual harassment tribunals."

"No, you're sending me to parade around on camera in bikinis and cocktail dresses, pretending to flirt with some self-obsessed, croquet-playing ponce while I humiliate myself in front of all of Britain, all for the sake of writing an article—"

"Exposé."

"Whatever, it doesn't matter. I don't want to do this."

"I know you don't," said Scrimgeour, "but you will, because it's your job, and because you've never yet failed to do it well."

"No, I haven't," she agreed with a weary sigh. "What do you need me to do?"

"But I don't want to be The Bachelor," James told his mum.

Euphemia waved a hand at him from where she lay on her favorite lounge, gracefully lit by the sun rays streaming in through the tall living room windows. "You're already a bachelor. What difference does it make if you're The Bachelor?"

He pushed himself off the sofa to give himself the illusion that he had more power over his mum if he reminded her he was taller. "Yeah, minor differences, like the entire country watching me go on dates."

"I'm sorry, James, for getting you into a situation in which you date hot girls. Have I got it wrong? Do you not want to date hot girls?"

"Not in front of four countries!"

"It's just the UK. That's a much smaller audience than the American version."

"That's still millions of people! And those shows are so cheesy and fake—"

She leveled a look at him. "They're fascinating. I love them. Don't ever insult them in front of me again."

"Mum!" He strode toward the windows, where he crossed his arms and stared out at the garden. Sirius was back there doing the crossword on a bench, blissfully enjoying his wonderful, privileged life where his acting-mum hadn't forced him onto a reality television show. Arse. "This is too far, even for you."
"Too bad I already forged all the paperwork for you and submitted it."

He spun around, arms dropping to his side. "And that was it? They don’t, like, interview me or anything? Make sure I’m not a serial rapist-slash-murderer?"

"Those sorts of discoveries are what make shows like this so exciting."

"I refuse to believe they’d let me star on this show without talking to me."

"Funny enough, they did, since it’s Rita’s show and Rita adores me."

James’s face paled. "Not Rita."

"She’s brilliant at finding the story. And she knows how handsome and wealthy you are."

"And those were the two criteria? Fit and rich?"

"What else would they include?"

"Maybe someone’s sense of humor, and charm, and, I don’t know, the fact that they’re willing?"

"You consented. I saw myself write your signature."

"That’s not legally binding!"

She beckoned him over, and, fearing further bad news, he complied. She reached up and placed both her hands around one of his. "James," she said, looking up into his eyes. "Watching you be on this show is my dying wish."

"But you’re not dying!" he said, trying to get his hand free. It did not work. He was taller, but years of baking naan had given her a mean grip.

"We’re all dying, James. And when I go for real, seventy years from now—"

"What—"

"—watching you do The Bachelor will still be my dying wish."

"You mean watching me get married?"

"Yes. That’s definitely what I said."

He tugged at his hand one more time. "Mum. For the last time: I am not doing this show."

She patted his hand and finally released him. "You’ve put up an excellent show of protesting, love. You can consider your dignity maintained. Now, let’s go get you a nice outfit for the first episode."
Episode 1

"James Potter has it all," Sirius’s voice announced dramatically on the television. "Looks. Money. Family and friends. But there’s just one thing missing in his life."

James crushed two pillows against his ears in an attempt to block out the sound. His face felt about 200 degrees.

Sirius started wrestling him for the pillows. "My voiceover is excellent—you’ve got to listen."

"No!" James struggled to keep the pillows in place, but more of the intro video snuck into his ears. "I don’t want to see this!"

"Er, yeah, I’ve had some girlfriends," came James’s own voice. He was sitting on a park bench, which was somewhere he never hung around, but Rita had insisted on having the flower trellis in the background. She’d asked him probing questions about himself that left basically no stone unturned. And there, behind the camera in all of the filming, was his starry-eyed, gleeful mum. Also Sirius, the bastard, high on schadenfreude.

"My last girlfriend moved to Argentina," James’s voice added. "Not because of me, though. It was a work thing—promise. Although she was also vaguely allergic to cats. Also strawberries, but that was less of an issue in our relationship."

Sirius had pinned him on his stomach on the couch, James’s head turned toward the television. Stupid bastard spent too much time on weights so he’d look even fitter.

"I work for my dad’s company," the video continued. "He started it and has done really well for himself. We make all sorts of hair and beauty products now." James’s eyes flicked off camera. "Which all the girls will have access to," he read mechanically.

The footage showed him pretending to talk on the phone at his work desk. He wished he’d removed the cat pin-up calendar behind him that Sirius had given him as a joke.

"I work in the research and development division. Been there since I left uni. It’s all right—I get to be creative, I guess. Also sometimes we blow stuff up. Mostly on purpose." He paused, then added, "At least half the time on purpose."

The camera cut to him sitting alone on a beach at sunset, staring into the distance. It looked dramatic but he’d kept finding sand on his skin for days.

"I live in London. I guess I’d like to live there in the future." His voice shifted to actually sounding interested. "I’ve got a cat. His name’s Algernon and he’s brilliant." In a shot in his flat, James proudly held up a disgruntled Algernon. "He’s not too keen on me doing the show, but it’s probably because I won’t be able to give him much attention during the filming. He’ll probably sick up a lot in my bed in revenge but that’s just him.

"What I like in a girl is…” Now he was back on the park bench. A bird had shat on him not long after this part. "I dunno, I guess. Good sense of humor. Clever. Likes cats, of course. And, er…yeah. Besides that I can’t think of anything. Oh! Arsenal supporter. That’s a plus."

"Will James find the Arsenal-supporting girl of his dreams?" Sirius’s voiceover asked.

"You prick!" James protested from his awkward position on the couch. "That was the least
"Over the next eight weeks," Sirius’s voice continued, "James will have his pick of twelve women —"

"That’s so misogynistic!" James cried.

"—who will live in this stunning castle."

The video showed footage of the castle taken from a drone. It looked like the extravagant home from Downton Abbey, and was equally unnecessary, a disturbing reminder of the continuing wealth inequalities in Britain. Especially for many brown people, James’s family excluded.

"The girls are about to arrive, with the sole objective of winning James Potter’s affections. But will these girls open themselves to love? Will they be able to keep his attention, and keep away the other women? Most importantly: will James get his happily ever after? Find out on the first-ever season of… The Bachelor UK."

James groaned. "I’d take a mediocremly ever after if it meant I didn’t have to do this."

"I think I’m going to become a professional host," Sirius told him. "So don’t fuck this up." He rolled off of James and smoothly onto his feet, then patted James’s head. "It won’t be so bad. You’ve got hot girls competing for your attention. Just have fun, yeah?"

James pressed his face into the sofa. "Yeah," he sighed. "Fun."

"I’m not here to make friends," declared Helena ominously. "I’m here to find love."

She made this announcement with her shoulders pushed back, her chest thrust out, and her cleavage bursting out of the perilously low-cut, glittering fuchsia dress into which she had squeezed herself. The limousine they were in trundled slowly across the bumpy, pebbled drive of the stately home they’d be sequestered in for the rest of the night.

Or, potentially, several weeks, though Lily was hoping that this fiasco of an assignment would come to a far quicker end than that.

The clock had not yet struck seven, and they’d already been plied with more champagne than ought have been acceptable for that particular time of day.

This wasn’t a viable long-term arrangement.

The deal that Lily had struck with Rufus—in exchange for a much higher per-word rate than she would normally receive—stipulated that she would embody the character he had created with at least a passing attempt at enthusiasm. She’d do what she could to stick it out for long enough to gather intel on the behind-the-scenes workings of the show, maybe four or five episodes, but she was under no obligation to fight her way to the bitter end.

She couldn’t begin to comprehend why anyone would want to fight, let alone the five young, successful, and ostensibly sane women in the car with her (with the exception of Helena, whose gung-ho intensity was more than a little frightening, and who, for some reason, had taken a hula hoop into the limo). Although she hadn’t met the six others who inhabited the limo that crawled just ahead of theirs, Lily could only assume that the calibre of woman it contained was just as high.

Bonnie was a secondary school teacher, for crying out loud. Valerie was a veterinarian. It seemed
ludicrous to Lily that an attractive, educated woman would volunteer herself to pout and pose and vie for the attention of a man—any man, but especially the kind of man who felt comfortable engaging in a ritual as misogynistic and debasing as holding court over a group of women and deeming himself fit to pit them against one another for a shot at something so meaningless as fucking him.

Lily would not be pitted, not even for the sake of an exposé. It had been one of her caveats. She'd pretend that she was one of those hard-to-get girls if she had to, but nothing on earth would compel her to fall over herself in pursuit of attention from some wannabe playboy who likely had nothing but his looks going for him, if even that. She generally wasn't a fan of stereotypically handsome men.

Rufus wanted a show of desperation. He'd wanted her to wade waist-high into a sinkhole of self-degradation for the sake of added oomph. Lily, conversely, had wanted to punch her boss hard and in the face. In the end they settled upon a friendly, impersonal approach, working from his absurdly sexist theory that there were bound to be one or two desperate, overzealous women in the group who would easily mark themselves out for an early elimination, saving her by proxy.

She hated this. She hated this. She hated this.

She wanted to hug every woman in the limo—not Helena—and tell them that their lives could come to so much more than what they were doing.

It would be nice, she thought, fiddling with the hem of her dress (olive green and stupidly pricey, but she'd managed to have it placed on expenses, which Rufus hadn't been pleased about, but as Rufus was the one making her do this, he could kiss her tightly-swathed ass), if she wasn't the only one here with a hidden agenda.

Maybe they were all planning exposés. Maybe it'd all boil down to an exposé-off. An exposé Olympics. She who writes the fastest laughs the loudest.

A girl could only dream.

"I'm here for a free holiday," piped up Beatrice, twenty-eight, singing instructor, likes dancing, mimosas, and long walks to the cash register, but only if a strong-armed man is the one carrying her purchases. Such were the introductions that had been made shortly before they'd been bundled into the limo.

Helena eyed her coldly. "Enjoy your limo home tonight."

"Thanks for the concern, but I'll be happy to take the bus when I've been chewed up and spat back out. There's got to be a stop within at least ten miles from here."

"If you're not disposed of in a trash compactor," said Lily quietly.

Beatrice grinned widely at her. "Ground into meat for the castle hounds."

"I heard they let you loose on the lawn and set the hounds on you when you're eliminated," put in Bonnie, twenty-nine, enjoys crafting, studied in Barcelona for a year, proud owner of dozens of Feis medals for Irish dancing. Her thick black hair was gathered in an elegant chignon, and she, like Lily, was the only other woman in the car who had opted for water instead of fizz.

"Nice," said Beatrice. "Does anyone have a raw steak I could borrow? Squeaky toy? Handily humpable leg?"
"If none of you are going to take this seriously," Helena began, "you might as well turn around and go home." Her face was beginning to flush with gusto and probably booze, the contrast between her vibrantly pink cheeks and her bleach-white hair immediate and obvious. "There are some of us who—"

"Could you relax for like, five seconds?" Beatrice retorted. "It was just a joke. Obviously, I'm here to find love, too, I just don't fancy harping on about it."

"Save it for the cameras, right?" said Bonnie.

"Exactly," Beatrice agreed, lifting her champagne flute in agreement. With her smooth, tanned skin, sleek brown hair, and dandelion yellow dress, she was easily the prettiest girl in the car, and the prettiest girl Lily had met in as long as she could remember. "Save it for the cameras."

She took a sip, caught Lily's eye and smiled at her—something dry and droll, a smile that said, "can you believe this shit?"—while Helena made ugly scoffing noises, Bonnie smirked into her own drink, and the waiflike, strawberry-blond Marjorie stared resolutely at her silk-sheathed knees.

Lily couldn't be the only woman here with a hidden agenda.

"I'm not doing it," James insisted, pushing back against his mother’s shove. "I'm not I'm not I'm not."

"They spent a fortune on that tux." Euphemia managed to move him another step forward, both her hands flat against his back. "You're going to go out and show it off."

Sirius clapped him on the shoulder. "Don’t worry, mate. Remus and I will be here for you every step of the way. Thoroughly enjoying your misery."

"Only partially," Remus conceded. He and Sirius both looked dapper in their navy suits. James outshone them, of course, because he looked like James Bond, but they were nothing to sneeze at either. "We’ll also be helping you make good choices."

"I've made a horrible choice showing up today," James said, "so you've already failed. You're fired."

Sirius shook his head. "You only get to fire the girls. We're off-limits."

"Not if I punch you in the face," James muttered.

Sirius solemnly pressed a hand to his heart. "I’d persevere with my black eye. Just for you. And for the laugh."

The two of them were called away to review the intro footage they’d shot earlier, leaving James, his mum, and Algernon standing amidst blinding lights in front of the castle’s main entrance. James wished for a pair of sunglasses, ones that would both protect his precious eyes and make him look even cooler. Although they’d lit the castle quite dramatically, with upward facing lamps all around, and it would be difficult to enjoy that with sunglasses.

At least three cameras on wheeled tripods pointed at him and his so-called friends and actual mum (or so she claimed). Another camera stood facing the long drive, which was lined by tall lanterns with thick candles.
"Just missing the bloody red carpet," James said under his breath.

Algernon meowed at his feet. He’d tolerated a bath for the occasion, and had then preened himself for a good hour before finally agreeing to leave their room in the castle’s west wing. They’d been late, and none of the showrunners had believed that it’d been his cat’s fault.

"Two minutes," Rita said. She’d donned an acid-green dress that looked much too formal considering she’d never be on camera. She peered at James over her rhinestone glasses. "Don’t ruin this for us. This show is going to make us a lot of money."

"I don’t even want to be here!" James protested. "And we’re not profiting at all."

"I’m profiting emotionally," said Euphemia. "And isn’t that the greatest payout of all?"

James started to turn around. "I’m going to go drown myself in the pond."

"If you’re going to do the suicide thing," Rita said, "at least jump off the top of the castle. On camera."

Euphemia cuffed the back of his head. "You’d ruin your suit. Now come on, practice your welcoming smile."

"I’m not a bloody marionette. I’m here—isn’t that good enough?"

"No," Rita said flatly. "Now smile."

James stuck his tongue out at her but regretted it immediately. He was twenty-eight, for Christ’s sake. He should’ve come up with a scathing retort worthy of his wit.

To be fair, he told himself, they were treating him like a child. It was only natural he’d react like one.

"No more tongue unless it’s into some girl’s ear," Rita said.

James blanched. "Oh my God. Oh my God, where is that pond—"

"Too late." Rita grabbed him by his upper arms and yanked him two steps to the left, directly in front of the front doors. "I hear the first limo."

His mum pecked his cheek. "Good luck!"

"I hate you," he said.

"So long as you smile!" She grinned, picked up Algernon—who shot James a pitying look—and hurried off-camera.

Rita gripped his arms bracingly. "Remember: these ladies are desperate and easy to please."

"Er, okay?"

"But don’t be afraid to make them work for it. Makes for a better story."

"I will do no such thing," James announced. "But not-thanks for the advice."

One of the cameramen gestured frantically at Rita. She shot James a last warning look and somehow walked smoothly across gravel in her towering heels.
The front end of a sleek black limo nosed onto the drive, the sides reflecting the flickering candlelight from the lanterns.

James rubbed his sweaty hands on his trousers. Oh, God, what had his mum got him into? He was going to make a complete arse of himself on national television. He was going to make a complete arse of himself in front of a bunch of hot girls. Worst, he was going to make a complete arse of himself in front of Algernon.

The limo was almost here. Girls were going to get out. They’d walk up to him individually and say things and flirt and he would have to say something.

What was he supposed to say?!

He looked sideways to Remus and Sirius, who stood near one of the cameras, and silently pleaded for help.

Remus sent him a bracing thumbs up. Sirius just smirked.

The limo stopped a short distance from him. A weirdly far away distance, not right in front of him like he expected. Why were they making these girls walk so far to get to him?

The door opened.

His heart dropped into his stomach.

A modest heel stuck out of the car, followed by a leg and then another. Out emerged a short, thin woman in a floor-length, slinky blue dress. She glided toward him, the gravel crunching faintly beneath her feet, and tossed her mane of straight dark hair over her shoulder.

She was looking at him she was looking at him and oh my God she was gorgeous. As she approached—and maybe this was why they’d set the limo so far off, so he’d have a moment to recover from the shock of how attractive these women were—he could see more details, like her wide lips and dark eyes and perfect brown skin.

What the fuck what the fuck what the fuck was he supposed to say?

She was in front of him now, smiling, making eye contact, and oh dear oh dear this was not good. He was not good with girls he fancied.

"Hi," he said, but it came out more like a strangled yelp. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Hello. I’m James."

Rita had prepared him for this part, at least. He bent down to bump his cheek against hers as they kissed the air.

She stepped back and smiled. "I’m Isabella Marks. It’s so nice to meet you. I love your tux—very James Bond."

James beamed and felt himself grow taller. "Yeah! It is, isn’t it? That’s the only reason I let them put me in it, to be honest."

She laughed, her eyes sparkling in the bright lights. "D’you like Bond movies, then?"

"I bloody love them. Which one’s your favorite?"

"Diamonds are Forever, but mostly because it has an elephant playing slots."
Butterflies burst into existence in James’s stomach.

"Are you serious?" he asked excitedly. "I used to watch that bit over and over again as a kid!"

"You’re joking," she said through her smile.

"I’m really not. Seriously, that elephant is amazing."

Euphemia was a fucking genius for putting him on the show. Maybe this wouldn’t be as horrible as he’d thought, if they’d really been this good about finding girls he’d like.

James grabbed Isabella’s hand. "I cannot wait to introduce you to my cat. You’re going to love him. I’ve been working to teach him to fetch things."

"What, really? That’s so impressive."

He tore his eyes away from Isabella’s to see Rita waving her arms madly behind a camera. Remus drew a line across his throat.

Right. They weren’t supposed to talk long here.

"Yeah, I know," he said, squeezing her hand. "I’m really excited to talk to you more later."

Her smile broadened. "You can tell me about your favorite Bond movie."

"Oh, yeah. Definitely."

She withdrew her hand from his and sidled by, looking up at him as she walked. He stared after her even once she was long inside, and then sighed happily.

"Oh my God," he moaned. "Sirius, did you see that?"

Rita shushed him, and pointed back at the limo.

Right. Right. He had to do this eleven more times.

He was going to die. He’d planned that suicide by drowning, but instead his mum would kill him via reality television.

Another woman emerged from the limo.

A tall woman. A very tall woman, taller than both James and Sirius. Lovely face, yeah, but she was so tall.

He had to tilt his head back to look at her. So much for this show finding his likes.

After the exceptionally tall Rhonda Roper, James had been introduced to Charlene Stebbins (perplexingly in a leather dress), Lucinda Zheng (looked like and was, it turned out, a model), and Wendy Wilde (gave him a mirror so he “wouldn’t forget about himself in all this”). The women just kept coming out of the limo, like some sort of weird clown car packed with fancy dresses and gorgeous ladies.

The last one out of the first limo was the pink-haired Camelia Pinkstone, who walked up to him and immediately stuck her hands into his hair.

"Oh my God," she said. "Your hair is gorgeous. How do you get it to do that?"
"Er," he said, his face feeling like a furnace, "I wash it?"

She threw her head back and laughed.

"I’m not joking," he muttered, but she didn’t seem to hear him.

By the time the second limo had replaced the first, James was ready to sit down. Possibly also to use the loo. But he had a feeling Rita didn’t care about those sorts of things.

The first couple of women from the second limo didn’t seem too bad. Bonnie Grogan did an Irish jig, but she laughed at herself when she slid on the gravel, so she was alright. Beatrice Booth stood out in her bright yellow dress and asked him about his favorite song. She didn’t blink when he said Careless Whisper, and they actually sang a few bars together. Any girl who liked Careless Whisper was getting a rose, he told himself.

Then things took the worst turn yet. Despite Marjorie Deacon’s petite frame, she somehow wrangled him down halfway through their introduction and planted a kiss on his lips.

He stood up, shocked, and blurted, "The first thing you should do with your mouth is ask."

"I’m just a girl who knows what she wants," she said smugly, "and I’m not afraid to go after it."

James shot desperate eyes at Sirius, but he was busy shoving his face into Remus’s shoulder to muffle his laughter, his chest shaking.

Rita looked delighted, her hands clasped together in front of her.

James pictured shoving her in the lake and not letting her up.

Somehow things got worse from there. A busty girl in a too-tight, bright pink dress burst out of the limo and immediately started hula-hooping. She slowly walked toward him, but never stopped shaking her hips.

He knew he should look away—her breasts would surely pop out at any moment, and James did not want to be involved in any nipplegate situations—but it was like watching a slow, gyrating train wreck.

When she finally, finally reached him, she let the hoop drop to the ground and announced, "I’m Helena Hodge. What’s your sign?"

He stared at her, then said, "Er, Ace of Base?"

She blinked at him. "What?"

"What?" James echoed.

She patted his arm pityingly. "I meant your astrology sign. I’m an astrologist."

"Ah. I’ve no idea, actually."

"Well, when were you born?"

"Twenty-seventh of March," he said cautiously.

"Ooooh, Aries. I like an Aries." She fluttered her eyelashes at him. "You can ram me anytime."
James immediately thought that he wanted to ram her with a moving car. The limo would do in a pinch.

She kept looking at him like he was supposed to say something. As if anyone could say anything in response to that.

"Why’ve you got a hula hoop?" his mouth said. His brain was still mentally in the limo’s driver seat.

"Because I’m fun," she said, spreading her arms out wide. One of her breasts came much too close to breaking free.

"Right," he said. "Er. Okay. Hope you...hope you have fun tonight."

She was definitely going home. He wondered if it was possible to give someone an anti-rose, like maybe a steaming plate of haggis, as an indicator that they should leave immediately.

He breathed out a sigh of relief as she walked past him.

Then he swore.

"Later," she cooed, and walked inside.

James stared after her, then turned to Sirius and Remus. "She pinched my arse!"

"No swearing!" Rita called.

"Why is no one on this show worried about consent?" James shouted.

"Hush," Rita said. "You’ve got two girls left."

Remus sent him an apologetic look. Sirius was on the ground laughing.

James sent them both a rude gesture.

"None of that either!" Rita added.

James grit his teeth and turned back to the bloody limo.

The second-to-last girl emerged, this one with ginger hair, a green dress, and simple, flat shoes.

She looked normal enough—besides the part where she was the most attractive one yet—but clearly looks were no indication of sanity.

He just hoped she could keep her hands to herself.

Also her tongue.

"Good luck," whispered Valerie, when the harried-looking, headset-wearing bloke who was crouched on the floor of the limo muttered something into his mic and gestured for Lily to go, get out, and move.

Good luck.

Huh.
As if she needed luck to converse with a man for thirty seconds.

Contrary to what her week-long cram session (hours and hours spent viewing episodes of the show from America and Australia, a week in which she had grown horrified to find herself growing sucked in and actively rooting for certain girls to get roses on more than one occasion) would have had an audience believe, she—and every other woman in this contest—had spoken to a man before. She knew what they were comprised of. She had been intimate with (and occasionally disappointed by) all of the major man parts. She had seen and heard and learned enough of men to be vastly unimpressed by a large majority of their kind.

There were things for which Valerie's wish was appreciated, like being on camera, for one. Pulling this whole thing off—the fake job, fake interests, uncharacteristic and frankly insulting life ambitions—without being discovered, for another. Having a multitude of people across Britain and Ireland watch her on television and form an opinion of her that couldn't be further from the truth was also an unpleasant prospect. All were terrible things, and she felt very much in need of a tidal wave of luck to get through it all.

She did not need luck to play nice with some puffed-up product of the patriarchy.

Even if he was really fit.

Which he was, she noted, as she stepped out of the car. Not that she had expected any less. The showrunners were hardly going to pick an ordinary looking bloke to place them all under scrutiny like an indecisive kid in a candy store.

Glasses. Good hair. Decent height.

Fit, in short. Passably fit. Inevitable douchebag fit. Not future-husband fit, despite Rufus's wild suggestion that Lily fall for the guy in the process of her research, prompting a trite turn into How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days territory, wherein they'd accidentally have meaningful sex in a shower, and Lily would be forced to declare her undying love for him in an apologetic-yet-pithy article.

She had the worst fucking employers.

The walk from limo to douchebag was a painful process because all she could see were cameras; two tucked away inside the bushes for those critical wide-shots, three more on dollies that followed her path along the drive, and a last one, closer than the rest, lurking merely feet away from the besuited monkey she was meant to try and charm.

It felt like too much effort even to smile, but she managed it, barely, when she drew level with him.

"Hi," she said, with what she felt was just the right amount of brightness. Nice. Pleasant. "I'm Lily Evans."

He bent down to nudge his cheek against hers, and she ignored every perverse inkling to jerk her head away and accuse him of getting too fresh for laughs.


Well done, she wanted to exclaim, you can string two words together to make a name, When do you get your big-boy pants? "Isn't the weather nice?"

Rufus had given her a list of potential conversation starters, things like "I'm so nervous," or "You're so handsome," but she hadn't attained the level of bullshittery required to pull it off. She wasn't nervous—at least, not for the reason anyone would expect—and he was handsome, but he
obviously knew that, and his ego wouldn't benefit from being told again.

"Uh, yeah, no rain. Miracle for England, really."

His eyes kept flicking warily down to her hands, as if he were afraid that she might tackle him to the ground and tickle him into submission.

Presumptuous of him.

"Well, I'm super glad I'm here." Big smile. Generic. Vapid. Just like the girls she'd seen on television. She was fitting right in.

"I'm not—I mean, I'm not...not glad you're here."

Whoever this clown was, Lily would have been willing to bet her flat that he was no linguistics professor, but she couldn't rag on him, lest she receive an irate call from Rufus later. He "knew a guy" in the production team who would be smuggling Lily's phone into the house later that night, and was apparently poised to keep her boss updated on the various goings-on.

She arranged her face into a look of sympathy. Let the poor, pampered prince think she gave a shit. "It must be so tiring to meet so many new people so quickly."

He breathed out heavily. "You have no idea."

"Well, only one to go," she said. "I'll just head inside, yeah?"

"It's what all the others have done. But you could always be original and go around to the side door."

She laughed, a quick, surprised thing. Who knew he could be mildly amusing? "Or back to the limo. There's a 24-hour McDonald's about two miles away, and I'm starving."

He grinned. It was all right, that grin. More than all right. "Pick me up some fries, yeah?"

"Only if you're paying," she said airily. Behind the cameras, Rita Skeeter was wrapped in the most offensively garish acid-green dress and signaling at Lily to get inside, so she stepped to one side and breezed past him. "Later."

She heard him laugh. "Later."

That, she reflected, was relatively painless and adequately bland. A nice compromise between her desire to insult him into oblivion for merely existing, and Rufus's desire for her to let him—James. Potter, he meant. James Potter—take her roughly on the castle steps.

Look how well she was doing!

With one last coy, plastered-on smile thrown over her shoulder, Lily stepped across the threshold through a lush, ornately-adorned foyer. The guiding hand of another member of the production staff led her into an elegant ballroom, where ten pairs of curious female eyes turned immediately to land upon her face.

"Well?" piped up Beatrice, who was reclining a chaise lounge, with what seemed like a fresh glass of champagne swaying from her slender, outstretched hand. "Are you madly in love yet?"

She laughed, and would have shaken her head, but cameras, cameras, cameras.
Time to make some friends.

The last girl out of the limo, Valerie Turpin, hadn’t been much of a conversationalist, but she seemed like a good listener and had striking blue eyes. Not as striking as Lily Evans’s green eyes, but still very noticeable. And he’d admired Valerie's shoulder blades as she’d walked inside.

The second she was in, James let himself drop to the gravel.

"Oh my God," he moaned.

Rita was there in a second to yank him sharply off the ground. With her other hand, she rudely started groping his arse, swatting all the pebbles away.

He wrestled himself out of her grip. "I can clean my own bum, thank you!"

"Stop being such a child."

"I’ve just been groped and snogged against my will. In part by you! So I think I’m entitled to a bit of a sulk, if you don’t mind."

"We need to go film your immediate reaction videos."

James groaned as she dragged him into the castle and into a side room, then shoved him onto a stool.

"You’re doing well," his mum said, rubbing one of his shoulders.

"Is it over?" he asked hopefully.

She gave a hearty laugh and stepped away.

"Not even close," Sirius said with relish.

James made a disgusted noise. "Where’s Remus?"

"Giving the girls instructions. I was supposed to go, too, but I was not missing this."

"I need emotional support right now. You’re not being very supportive."

"I’m sure Helena Hodge would love to give you some support."

James glared at him as Rita sat down just behind the camera. She leaned forward, resting her forearms on her crossed knees, and pinned him with her gaze.

"Right, James. How d’you feel about Isabella Marks?"

James felt his mouth break into a grin. This was an easy enough answer. "What’s not to like about Isabella? Gorgeous, likes James Bond, likes animals. Think I might just go propose now, honestly."

Rita gave a short laugh. "If you do, I’ll slit your throat," she said casually. "What about Camelia Pinkstone?"

James felt his heart stop for a second.

"Sorry?" he said. Sure, he’d fantasized about drowning Rita, but that was in his brain. Not spoken
aloud. Not said as confidently as if he’d done it before, and would readily do it again.

"Camelia Pinkstone. Quickly, James, just first impressions. Don’t overthink it."

James grimaced, and rubbed at his poor, abused hair. "Er. Camelia’s...outgoing?"

His posture sagged the longer he sat there. By the time they’d reached the final few—particularly after mentally reliving Marjorie Deacon and Helena Hodge—Rita scolded him to sit up straight.

He managed to pull himself up as Rita said, "And Lily Evans?"

James squeezed his eyes shut, trying to remember which one that was. "McDonald’s girl, yeah?"

"Yes."

"Um. All right, I guess. She didn’t grab my arse, so that’s always nice."

Sirius snorted loudly at the same time that Euphemia laughed.

Rita shook her head. "We can’t use that. Again."

"Lily seemed...nice? She likes McDonald’s and so do I."

Rita tapped her pen against her clipboard. "We can’t air that bit because we can’t namedrop brands. Again."

In one short night, James was really beginning to feel for circus animals. Maybe that was the career he should pursue: animal rights activist. He’d get to be around animals a lot, at least. And he’d get to shout a lot. He did like shouting.

"Er," he said. "Right. Um... Lily’s got really lovely eyes. And she’s not too forward. Think she might be nice once you get to know her."

"Good enough. And Bonnie?"

They ran through the remaining few and then finally let him off the stool.

"Would you get me some McDonald’s fries?" he asked his mum as he stretched his arms above his head.

"Not a chance. You’re not getting grease on that suit." She handed him an iced drink in a tall glass. "You may, however, have some iced tea."

"Cheers," he said, and took a gulp. He choked as soon as it hit his tongue, his hand flying up to cover his mouth. He forced a swallow and coughed. "Are you sure it’s not turpentine?" he demanded.

"I forgot to mention the Long Island part," she said airily.

"It’s all island and no tea, and that’s the best bit." He shoved the drink back at her.

"Fine. I’ll have them make you an appletini."

He narrowed his eyes. "Curse you and your intimate knowledge of my beverage weaknesses."

She smiled at him. "You are such a wonderful son. Fulfilling his mum’s dying wish—what more
could a woman ask for?"

"You always complain you wanted a daughter."

"And I’ll get one when you marry one of these girls. It’s win-win, really."

"How’s it a win for me?"

Euphemia gave him a sly grin. "Isabella is a fitness instructor. Need I say more?"

James felt his mouth go dry. "No," he said hoarsely. "No, you do not and absolutely should not."

She pecked his cheek. At last, a touch he was comfortable with. "As I thought. Now go drink up and meet the girls."

Lily shouldn't have been staring.

Or at least, she shouldn't have been staring with such raw, unbridled lust in her eyes.

If the cameras picked up on this, she'd look like an utter tit on national television. Her sister, in particular, would never let her live it down, but she couldn't seem to help herself.

It had been such a long time, far too long, since she'd had any, and now it was right there, so tantalizingly close, should she be so inclined to reach out and take it, the most beautiful sight she had ever beheld...

She could admit, now, in this strange situation, in this extravagant house, surrounded by these gorgeous, fascinating creatures with whom she was meant to be competing, that she had never before appreciated the stunning, simplistic beauty of a well-stocked buffet table.

So why was nobody else eating?

Weren't they hungry?

Surely she wasn't the only person who hadn't eaten since three a.m.? She couldn't be the only girl who had been unceremoniously hauled out of bed in the middle of the night and bungled in the car that took her to a beige, humdrum hotel, where she spent several hours locked in an even-more-beige room, with nothing to do but drink water from the bathroom tap and preen for the night ahead—hair and makeup services were not provided, though she had been at liberty to help herself to as many free cosmetics as she fancied—and count the rivets on the ceiling until the limo arrived to ferry her to the castle.

And how were the others able to drink so much, especially on empty stomachs? Lily's professed desire to stick to water had been completely ignored by acid-green Rita, who shoved a glass of champagne into her hand and ordered her to toss it down, and even that had been enough to make her slightly woozy.

The party had been in full swing for close to two hours, during which time she had circulated the room twice to get to know the other girls. They were far more interesting than the bachelor himself, and a natural first port of call for intel, should she make it through the night.

If Lily's suspicions were correct, and more than one of them had applied for reasons unrelated to finding romance, she'd need to gain at least a cursory level of trust from them if she hoped to pick their brains. It was a competition, after all, and all of the girls had expressed a firm desire to be in
possession of a rose by the end of the night, though it remained to be seen if most of them actually liked James or simply wanted to win for the sake of it. Any contestant with ulterior motives would be wise to keep them to herself at first. Helena had already accused at least two other people of not being there for the right reasons.

Helena Hodge was undeniably nuts—certifiable, really—and seemed destined to be booted out by evening's end. She and Marjorie Deacon were so passionately committed to gaining James's attention, and so slavishly adoring of him in conversation, that it seemed entirely unlikely that either of them were here for any reason unrelated to the pursuit of a husband.

Some of the others, though…

Right off the bat, Lucinda Zheng made it quite apparent that she was there to widen the sphere of her social media influence. She had mentioned her Instagram and Twitter accounts on more than one instance, referring repeatedly to "her brand" and all that came with it. She had told Lily that her accounts were being managed by a fellow influencer for the duration of the show to ensure her follower count remained high. Further conversation with her was definitely a priority.

Then there was Valerie Turpin, who made an offhand comment about how few female friends she had, and how excited she was to be in a house with so many other girls. This seemed like a perfectly valid excuse to be there, though it was something that Lily hadn't considered when she'd tried to reason out why so many women applied for this show. Similarly, Wendy Wilde seemed more excited about the prospect of travel and adventure than she was about James. Lily definitely had her suspicions about Beatrice Booth, whom she hadn't managed to grab for a one-on-one chat as of yet; Charlene Stebbins, who just seemed to want to show off; and, though Lily wouldn't have bet her life on it, Rhonda Roper, who seemed to be there only for the sake of her ego.

Conversely, Isabella Marks, who was bright and bubbly, and who Lily had liked almost at once, seemed so sweetly, innocuously smitten with James that Lily almost felt poised to wish them a happy life together.

It had been a long night so far, but she'd gotten some good initial feedback.

Long, fruitful, and tiring.

She was ravenous.

In fact, she had plateaued at a state beyond ravenous at this point. Lily was starving. She was wasting away. She was…supposed to have been trying her hardest to snag a minute alone with the besuited monkey, but he had escaped her notice entirely at that moment.

He was probably snogging Isabella—whom he seemed to really like—in the grotto they had been shown during their whistle-stop tour, or being lassoed by Helena's hula hoop, or standing on a small platform at the behest of Ruthless Rita, performing various tricks in exchange for his physical safety, like balancing an inflatable ball on the end of his nose.

Lily was not to blame for this oversight. The buffet table housed an assortment of fruits and finger foods, and a variety of sauces, but the other eleven girls were all about the bar, where the drinks appeared to be ever-flowing. At least two of them were already drunk, most notably Marjorie, who had lurched up to her not twenty minutes ago and bragged about having snogged James and been promised a rose already.

It wouldn't really hurt if she snagged a small plateful, would it?
She needed to keep her brain in good working order for this investigation.

Brains required food. That was simple science.

Fuck it. Passing herself off as a bionic fembot who could be fueled only by copious amounts of vodka was *not* part of her job description. She was getting some sustenance.

With some trepidation, and a quick look around to see what everyone else was doing—Helena and Marjorie had gotten into some sort of argument by the fireplace, and most of the cameras had zeroed in on them for the moment—she darted to the table and seized a plate from atop a large stack.

It was obviously made from bone china, and probably more expensive than her phone and laptop. This seemed like a bloody stupid idea, considering how production seemed to intend to keep each and every woman in the house in an alcoholic stupor. Those dishes were going to get smashed, whether accidentally or on purpose—she wouldn't have put it past Helena to toss a plate or two when she was feeling particularly irate.

It was ironic, then, that she let the plate slip straight through her fingers when she felt something brush unexpectedly up against her legs.

"*Shit,*" she hissed as the plate landed, but thankfully did not break, on the carpeted floor. She looked about her quickly, relieved to find that nobody appeared to be paying her any attention. Marjorie and Helena had begun to raise their voices.

Her mic, however, was fully functional, and she knew that someone in a sound room had just been forced to listen to her swear into their ear.

"*Sorry,*" she whispered, and bent to retrieve the plate, and investigate the source of the brushing. The table itself was covered in a thick, white cloth that was long enough to trail an inch across the ground.

Slowly, tentatively, she reached out a hand and lifted it up.

Behind the tablecloth, and much to her surprise, there sat a cat.

A very ginger cat.

A very plump, very fluffy, undeniably magnificent ginger cat, who purred happily at her appearance.

"*Hello,*" she said, blinking. The last thing she had expected to find in this booze-soaked femme-parade was a cat of any kind. "*Who on earth are you?*"

The cat responded by taking a couple of steps forward and nudging its fluffy head against her hand.

For the third time in as many minutes, she took a quick scan of the room, this time straightening up a little and peering out from behind a plate of cubed cheese.

Still, nobody was looking. She spotted the besuited monkey in a corner with Isabella, while Helena and Marjorie's screaming match had successfully captured the attention of everyone else.

She lowered herself to her knees, and the cat purred again. Beneath his fluffy chin, she could just make out a large, round, shining silver name tag.
Algernon. His name was Algernon.

Was this some sort of test? Some part of the show she didn't know about? She couldn't think of any scenario in which a cat could bring about some sort of dramatic, first-episode twist, but one never knew with reality television. She'd seen one episode of this show where a contestant had come wearing a giant unicorn head, so why not a cat?

She pulled her hand away, and Algernon darted forwards as if determined to prevent her escape, knocked his head against her thigh, then retreated beneath the table once again.

"Do you need something?" she asked.

The cat simply stared at her.

"Are you thirsty? Do you need water, or food, or...?"

Algernon merely continued to stare. Not food, then, though why she was attempting to glean *intent* from the impassive eyes of a cat was beyond her. Something told her that he didn't need feeding at that minute, perhaps because he looked so well cared for, with his chunky little body and his beautiful coat.

"Are you scared?" Lily asked, while Helena's yelling started to climb to a fever pitch in the background. "Bored? Do you want a petting? A cuddle?"

The cat meowed at her, with an impressive swish of his tufty tail.

"A cuddle, then?" she concluded, and Algernon meowed again. "Right."

A mad idea popped into her head.

One that she could not, realistically, attempt to carry out, because she was on camera, and hooked up to a microphone, and likely being very heavily scrutinized at this very moment.

But it was loud in the room, and hot, and Lily was tired. Surely it wouldn't be so bad if she just...

Maybe the production would think she was charmingly eccentric, and insist on keeping her in.

Maybe she was too tired and hungry to care.

Without even bothering to glance around this time, she edged beneath the table.

The booze had been steadily flowing by the time Remus and Sirius announced James’s entrance to the cocktail party. As he descended a staircase—after having climbed another one elsewhere in the house, for the sheer ridiculous purpose of making this dramatic entrance—all the girls began applauding.

James loved being applauded, but not for the meager task of successfully walking down a set of carpeted stairs. They’d even told him to hold the railing for a more pleasing shot.

He forced a smile as he reached the bottom and came around to face everyone.

Remus and Sirius flanked him immediately.

"I’m Sirius Black. And this," Sirius said, throwing an arm around James’s shoulders, "is my best mate. My brother. Not by law, but that’s what makes us better than regular brothers."
Remus coughed. "And I’m Remus Lupin, another one of James’s mates. We’ll be your hosts for this evening and the duration of the show."

Helena elbowed aside Marjorie to get to the front of the girls. James tried very hard not to look at her chest. Had her dress somehow become lower-cut since he’d seen her last? That didn’t seem physically possible.

Sirius took his arm off James. "You ladies have three hours to get to know each other and our mate James here before our very first rose ceremony."

"James will be giving out two first-impression roses tonight," Remus added. "But two others will, unfortunately, be going home."

Sirius rubbed his hands together. "So drink up—"

"Try again!" Rita called from behind them.

"So have fun," Sirius amended. "And best of luck to all of you."

From there, his two best mates threw him to the elegantly-dressed, boozed-up wolves.

Helena pounced first, of course, literally throwing her hula hoop around him and dragging him away to a private grotto. From there, she proceeded to grab his thigh, imply she had plenty of sexual experience to share, and at one point seemed to reach for his fly.

This was the start of a series of quick interactions with the women, only for the ladies to constantly interrupt each other:

- A drunken Marjorie "Learn Consent" Deacon threw herself onto the sofa in between James and Helena and asked, "Are you two still chatting?" as though she had not cut off Helena mid-sentence.
- Camelia "Wandering Hands" Pinkstone interrupted James’s lovely conversation with Beatrice "Careless Whisper" Booth to marvel some more at his hair. At least he’d got to give Beatrice one of his first impression roses before that.
- Wendy "Magic Mirror" Wilde asked if she could pull him away from his thoroughly uninspiring chat with Charlene "Leather Dress" Stebbins to awkwardly show him how to tango.

Rita insisted he go along with all of it.

Some of the girls, like Bonnie "Irish Dancer" Grogan, were actually really decent. She was a bit too short, but not in temperament—she was one of those exceptionally patient teachers that students always loved. Unfortunately, though, she taught French, the worst of all languages. Also physics, which was all right, but the French bit was a real turn-off.

And then, of course, there was Isabella. Isabella Marks, the girl of James’s dreams, and the recipient of the other first impression rose. She laughed at all his jokes. She talked at length and with glee about her three cats. And she had excellent opinions on the rankings of Bond villains.

He could easily see himself revealing his secret middle name to her before this show was over.

Beatrice and Bonnie were up there, too, but Isabella. She even supported Arsenal, the only team in the league worth not just its salt, but whole salt and pepper mines.

If only there weren’t all these bloody cameras surrounding them from all angles. If only there
weren’t boozy, handsy girls trying to get into his trousers. If only Rita would just give him a bloody hour with Isabella instead of forcing him to spend time with eleven other women.

When he was with Isabella, he could almost forget there were so many perverted camera people never taking their eyes off him.

Just as he was making Isabella laugh with his Sean Connery impression, Rita signaled for him to wrap it up.

"I’m sorry," he told Isabella. "I’ve got to go chat with someone else now. The party’s almost over."

"It’s all right." She smiled. "I have a feeling you’d stick around if you could."

"Don’t tell the other girls," he said in a low voice, "but I absolutely would."

Rita’s hand clamped around his arm again. He was going to be massively bruised by the end of this.

Once they’d left Isabella, Rita stopped in a small alcove away from the girls. "Right," she said. "You’ve talked to everyone but Lily Evans."

"Which one’s she?"

"McDonald’s girl."

"Oh, yeah." He frowned. "I haven’t seen her all night."

Rita smirked. "That’s because she’s under a table."

James stared at her for a moment.

Clearly the appletinis, the groping, and Isabella’s perfume had thrown his senses out of whack.

"I’m sorry?" he said.

"She’s under the buffet table. Go get her."

"Oh my god, she’s that pissed? It’s only the first night."

"No." Rita tilted her head. "At least, I don’t think so."

"Oh. Then what’s she doing under a table?"

Rita smirked. "Hopefully waiting to pounce on you in surprise."

James pulled a face. "I think it means she wants to quit the show. No need to chat with her, yeah?"

"Inside," Rita said. "Now."

James sighed and dragged himself around toward the door. "Last one, though, right?"

"Yes. Then we’ll meet back in the studio room to discuss who’s going home."

He waved a hand. "I’ve already got it figured out, so it should be quick."

Rita’s eyes crinkled, like she was smiling without her mouth. "Oh, yes," she said. "It will be."
As he stepped into the room, James prepared himself for a mobbing. Fortunately, though, Helena and Marjorie were having a heated conversation by the fireplace, and all the girls were watching. He ducked into the room, slid along the wall furthest from the girls, and rushed on tip-toes over to the buffet table in the corner.

Two olive-green flats sat abandoned beside a table leg.

He frowned. Shoeless and under a table were definitely not on his list for the ideal woman.

Rita coughed in the distance. James shook his head, prepared himself for a fight to keep his trousers on, and sank into a crouch.

He lifted up the white tablecloth, and yes, there, sitting with her legs tucked under her, was Lily "McDonald’s Fries" Evans. Tragically, though, she didn’t have any fries. Instead she was in the middle of cuddling his usually ornery cat.

Also she had a plate of cubed cheese beside her.

"Er," James said. "Hi."

She looked up at the sound of his voice, as did Algernon. Neither of them seemed particularly embarrassed, or ashamed, to have been discovered in such a strange and compromising position.

"Hi," Lily quietly replied, and then, "I don't really know how to explain this."

She had made no attempts at nonconsensual groping, and had clearly won the approval of his cat, which meant this was a woman James was not sending home tonight.

He lifted the edge of the tablecloth up to the buffet and weighed it down with a platter of sandwich meats, leaving him an opening to see Lily. Then he plopped down on the ground and gestured at her plate. "Well," he said. "I'd give up on the explanation if I could have some of that cheese instead. I’m starving."

She nudged the plate towards his knees, then turned her gaze back on Algernon, who was having a grand old time snuggling into her chest. "He's such an affectionate little thing. I couldn't resist."

James stared at her. "Literally no one has ever described him that way in his life."

"So this is your cat?"

"He objects to any implication that I own him. But he does live with me. So I guess he’s like my housemate." He popped a cube of delicious cheese in his mouth. So much better than a Long Island Iced Tea without the tea.

Not as good as that appletini, though.

"Why on earth—oi!" she softly admonished, then lifted Algernon up so that his eyes were level with hers and planted a kiss right between his eyes. "Watch where you put those paws, mister. Why on earth does nobody else think he's affectionate? He basically strong-armed me under the table with cuddles."

This was possibly the strangest interaction of the evening yet. Not the least pleasant, by any means. But every other girl was flinging herself his way to shower him in compliments and share their talents.
Lily Evans was barely looking at him.

Algernon preened under her attention.

"Well," James said, "his typical reaction to strangers is either to run away, hiss loudly, or straight up scratch them in the face, depending on how handsy they get with him. Algernon is big on consent."

"The first thing you do with your mouth is ask," she said absently, and returned Algernon to his earlier position, snuggled against her neck. "I must be special. Your cat is pretty fantastic, and I hope you know how lucky you are to have him."

James found himself smiling. Finally, a girl who knew what to do with her mouth!

If only she apparently cared anything for him instead of Algernon. Maybe Algernon should propose to her. Then James could have Isabella and they’d both be pleased.

"He is," he said, "without a doubt, the best thing that has ever happened to me. If only he’d fetch me a bacon sandwich, my life would be complete."

For the second time that evening, he surprised a laugh out of her.

"Is that all you need from life?" she asked, and smiled at him—not a fake, plastered-on smile, like so many of the other girls, but a genuine, pleased effort. "A bacon sandwich? Of all the things—"

"There you are!" came Helena’s high-pitched, grating voice.

James shuddered reflexively.

"And that’s the end of the cocktail party," Sirius announced loudly.

James considered proposing to Sirius just then.

"Guess I’ve got to run," James said. "Take care of Algernon for me while I’m off making the least important decision of my life."

Rita coughed. When had she even got close to him? She was like a bloody shark.

James gave Lily an upward nod. "Take care of Algernon for me while I’m gone, yeah?"

"Sure," Lily said, having already returned her gaze, and the brief attention she had bestowed upon him, to his absurdly contented cat. "Watch out for thorns."

He laughed and hauled himself up to his feet. "Enjoy your cheese."

His smile dropped as Rita’s too-familiar hand found purchase on him once more. As she guided him away from a stricken Helena, Rita said, "Now, remember the clause in the contract about how the producer has final say…"

Lily got a rose during the final ceremony.

Marjorie and Rhonda were sent home.

Rhonda’s expulsion was a little surprising, though Lily’s own inclusion was not.
Despite not having thrown herself at him at any point during the evening, the two interactions that she had shared with James had been perfectly agreeable. She'd also found a firm friend in his cat, to whom he seemed to pay a lot of deference. As such, she reckoned she was safe for a couple of episodes, provided she stuck to her front of vapid cordiality.

Being found under the table presented a bit of a challenge—there was no way to explain that with the insipidity required to keep up such a ruse—but she didn't think it had really hurt her chances. Rita seemed to love it. She'd questioned Lily at length on her "eccentric" choice during her first confessional, though "because I love cats" clearly wasn't the tragic-backstory-fueled-anxiety-attack response the show was looking for.

Lily didn't know what else she was supposed to say, though. She did love cats, and Algernon evidently loved her.

In fact, Algernon's attachment to her was so strong that he'd practically taken Isabella's hand off when she tried to move in for a cuddle. Sirius, one of the hosts, had had to help Lily divest herself of Algernon by forcibly untangling his claws from her dress before the ceremony, while a recently-returned James watched it all unfold in complete bewilderment. The cat had hissed and wailed like he was being led to the rack as he was bundled out of the room.

That had been strange, but what happened next—the rose ceremony—was even stranger.

The process of rose-giving was awkward and degrading for all involved, including the bachelor himself, who looked rather as if he'd had a cactus shoved up his bum for the entire duration. James could not merely hand out flowers, but had to call each individual woman forward and ask, "Will you accept this rose?" Said woman was expected to accept with some variant of profuse and humiliating elation.

The ladies played their part admirably, though Helena Hodge, to whom a rose was offered through gritted teeth, went completely overboard and threw her arms around his middle.

Helena was a ratings ploy if ever Lily had seen one. She'd overheard Rita talking about her right to a final say as she steered James away from the buffet table, which made her wonder if he had any control whatsoever over what was happening. Lily hadn't paid him much thought or attention as of yet, but what she'd seen of him differed greatly from the bachelors she'd watched on television. Those men were shameless in their enjoyment of the attention they'd received from the hopeful contestants.

James mostly seemed uncomfortable.

That might be something to look into, once she'd gleaned what she could from the women, who she believed—quite strongly—were the true victims in all of this.

When he'd offered the rose to her, she’d been half-inclined to berate him for not bothering to bring a vase in which she could keep it, but bit her tongue. Worse still, she hadn't even gotten to keep the bloody thing. A production member whipped the rose out of her hand as soon as the ceremony ended, and the process of showing them to their bedrooms began. The whole ceremony was so pointless, and she was going to have to relive it… likely two or three more times before he booted her out and started his life, marriage, and eventual celebrity divorce with Isabella Marks.

As far as she could glean from eavesdropping, James was staying in a luxury suite somewhere in the castle, while she and the nine remaining contestants were herded up to the very top of the house—what would have been the servants quarters, in Downton Abbey days—and placed two to a room. As had been stipulated in the contract Rufus had signed on her behalf, certain regulations
meant that there were no cameras or microphones in their bedrooms, nor in the one bathroom they were all to share, but this blissful slice of privacy came at a price.

"It is completely forbidden to venture anywhere else in the house at night," said Rita, who had taken it upon herself to lead them to their quarters, as they all trudged upstairs, most of them with their high-heeled shoes in their hands. "You may move between your bedrooms and the bathroom, nothing more."

"Unless you have a genuine medical emergency," put in another lady, Euphemia, who had joined them on the trek upstairs. She seemed to lack Rita's cutthroat attitude, though Lily wasn't exactly sure what her job was supposed to be.

"Yes, I suppose," Rita agreed, pausing briefly at the top of the stairs to look down at them all. "A security guard has been stationed up here to ensure your safety—"

To ensure they didn't escape.

"—so please, bother him if there’s an emergency." Rita then gave an exasperated sigh, and turned back around. "Follow me."

"I hope I'm rooming with you," whispered Isabella to Lily, and gave her arm a squeeze.

Lily smiled tightly back at her.

Isabella was very nice, and had taken to Lily almost as well as Algernon had, but Lily was too concerned with the Alcatraz-like sleeping arrangements to give much thought to who she wanted to share a room with.

It was bad enough that all personal devices had been banned—though Lily had already received her contraband in the form of her phone, which had been slipped to her in a napkin by a gaffer named Peter, and was currently hiding in the waistband of her knickers, charger to follow tomorrow—but it seemed she couldn't even stretch her legs at night without being apprehended by a bouncer.

What did they think might happen, one of the girls might try to sneak into James's bedroom?

Actually, if he really was sleeping in a luxury suite while the rest of them were hidden away upstairs like maids, that didn't sound like a terrible idea, provided she could boot him out of the room.

In the end, poor Isabella was paired with Helena Hodge, which was painful to think about. The latter had most determinedly set her sights on James, while it was clear to almost everyone that Isabella already had this competition won.

Lily was placed with Beatrice, for which she quickly found herself most grateful.

They were stripped of their microphones and shepherded into their room, where their belongings had already been brought, minus the forbidden items—including pens, books and paper—that had been taken from them upon arrival.

Beatrice tossed her heels in a corner. "Holy shit, that was a circus," she declared. "Which bed d'you want? Actually, never mind, they both look like torture devices."

"Adequate lumbar support isn't deemed a necessity when one is searching for their Happily Ever After," Lily agreed, eyeing the cots warily. "Hadn't you heard?"
Beatrice snorted in amusement, and dropped heavily down on the bed on the right side of the room. "Happily Ever After, my arse," she dryly intoned. "Get back to me when I wind up on *Strictly Come Dancing*, then we can talk about happy endings."

"So that's why you're here? To get on *Strictly*?"

"Well, I'm not here for that four-eyed puppet, and neither are you, so we might as well be honest with each other now," she said, with a sly smile that Lily couldn't help but mirror. "He seems like a nice bloke, I guess, but are we seriously supposed to find him attractive? The host is so much fitter than he is."

"Which one?"

"Remus."

"Ah." Lily nudged off her own shoes and sat down on the other bed, facing Beatrice directly. Her phone was digging into her hip—she'd need to remove it when the other girl wasn't looking. "To be fair, I do think he's attractive—James, I mean."

"You do?"

"Yeah," she said, in a ponderous sort of way, gazing off towards the ceiling. "Like a fancy window display, y'know? Visually pleasing, but that doesn't necessarily mean that I want to buy anything."

Beatrice let out a loud, quick laugh. "What a glowing assessment of our eligible bachelor."

"He gets to judge us, so I don't see why we can't judge him."

"Quite right, my darling." She lay down on the bed and turned on her side to keep her eyes on Lily, the train of her dandelion skirt trailing prettily over the edge. "Now, are you going to tell me why you're here, or am I going to have to guess?"

Lily considered arranging her features into a look of righteous offence, but Beatrice raised a knowing brow at her, and she knew she'd never pull it off convincingly.

"That depends," she said. "How good are you at keeping secrets?"

"The best you'll ever have, baby."

Lily smiled widely at her, and Beatrice smiled back.

Friend acquired.
James stared blearily up at the dated wallpaper lining his bedroom wall at the castle. A piece of paper with eight boxes now adorned the wall, a desperate move after the hell of the first rose ceremony. He’d taken great pleasure in etching out an X on the first box. Only seven horrible, miserable, wildly awkward ceremonies to go.

Rita had put her scarily-pointed high heel down about taking Helena off the show. At least she’d let him boot Marjorie because she agreed unconsenting kissing was unacceptable. Or rather, that it made for fantastic television the first time, but the show would undoubtedly be in hot water if it actively condoned such behavior.

This she explained with a lamenting voice.

It was all so pointless anyway. Isabella Marks was the one for James—he’d never hit it off with someone so immediately. It had been worth one never-ending hellish day to meet her. And it would likely be worth eight hellish ceremonies…

God, he hoped so.

If it hadn’t been for Isabella—and, yes, the massively contented look on his mum’s face the first night—he would’ve taken Algernon and made a run for it overnight, contract be damned. Algernon had even scoped out a path through the back garden. James could call a taxi from the nearby McDonald’s, just after acquiring some delicious and extremely well-earned fries.

Eventually there would be fries whenever he liked, and more time alone and unmonitored with Isabella… but only after several more excruciating weeks.

He would endure it, just for her.

And for his mum. Obviously.

With this in mind, James reluctantly agreed to go through with the bizarre one-on-one date they’d arranged with Lucinda "He didn’t remember enough about her to give her a nickname" Zheng. Not that he really had a choice in agreeing. And not that he didn’t bitch and moan about it the whole time. But he did it.

And technically he could have ruined the set-up by telling her about what was really going on.

Rita had got it in her head that James was a "bloke who liked a laugh," which was technically true but did not need to be said in such a menacing way.

The showrunners had decided to gauge Lucinda’s suitability for James by tricking her into thinking she and James were going to a cooking class. At one point James left her alone in a back office while he had to go "talk to Rita," and then when Rita and the cooking class’s organizer returned
without James, the organizer "couldn’t find his solid gold paperweight” on his desk. He immediately accused Lucinda of taking it.

James watched this cruel and stupid "prank" from a hidden camera while Rita backed up the organizer.

When Lucinda’s eyes welled with tears, James wrestled his way out of another producer’s restraining grip.

At the same time, Rita gave up on the prank and called James back in. "I’m so, so sorry," he immediately blurted. He picked up Lucinda’s hand. "That was really uncalled for."

Lucinda sniffled and squeezed James’s hand. "I thought being on this show would be a bit of fun, you know? Not—not like this."

James glared at Rita, who stood out of the hidden camera’s shot. She smirked and pulled a rose out of the organizer’s desk drawer.

Conniving bitch.

James stormed over, snatched the rose from her, and returned to shove it toward Lucinda. "There’s no way I’m sending you home for being upset about false accusations of thievery."

Lucinda eyed the rose cautiously. "That’s very sweet of you."

Rita clucked her tongue. "James, you have to ask her if she’s willing to accept the rose."

He spun around toward her and demanded, "Seriously?"

Rita raised her eyebrow. "You know I don’t joke about my show."

James gritted his teeth and turned back to Lucinda. "Will you accept this rose?"

Lucinda’s tongue peeked out over her bottom lip, and then retreated. "The thing is, James, I don’t… I don’t think I like being on a show that would treat women this way."

"I definitely don’t," he told her. "But you’re lucky enough to have a ‘get out of jail free card,’ and I don’t blame you if you take it."

He dropped the rose onto the floor because fuck this nonsense anyway, and instead opened his arms to Lucinda in the offer of a hug.

She stepped in and took it.

"Cheers," she whispered in his ear. "I’m gonna get so many sympathy follows."

James didn’t follow her follow talk, but it didn’t matter. Lucinda was free, the lucky bird.

James, on the other hand, was trapped.

He did get his mum to agree that this "date" was over the line, and she coerced Rita into agreeing that there wouldn’t be anything like it in the future. The next day, though, he wished he’d instead got a "no humiliating the girls or James" handshake deal instead.
"Oh, no," he said when he arrived at the group date location. "No no no no no."

Sirius was grinning maniacally. Remus, the traitor, looked vaguely amused. Peter was working, but when he spared a moment to come over, he told James he was dead jealous.

"You get to be so close to all these beautiful women," Peter said, gesturing at the posters lining the studio walls. They all featured stunning women embracing often-shirtless, muscle-covered men.

These posters would give all these girls expectations about what his chest should look like. High expectations. Expectations like that he’d be able to lift them over himself Dirty-Dancing style, when he couldn’t even do a pull-up or dirty dance.

The set of double-doors across the room opened to reveal the nine remaining contestants, Helena naturally at the front greedily searching for James.

"Ladies," Sirius said, sweeping around to them with his arms wide open. "Welcome to the romance novel photo shoot."

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"I just bet that James could lift me over his head," said Beatrice dreamily, loudly, and while James was most certainly within earshot. "Dirty-Dancing style."

She adjusted the skirts of her ridiculous milkmaid dress and tapped Lily gently on the arm with three fingers, to indicate that what she'd meant was, "no, he definitely bloody couldn’t, not with those twiglet arms," and Lily had to bite back a laugh.

It was their code, hers and Bea's. They'd worked it out on their second night in the castle, when it became clear that they both needed an outlet for their feelings and thoughts. Particularly when said feelings and thoughts prompted a deeply-ingrained need to be sarcastic, or to make fun of the people around them, because it happened far too frequently for both of them to keep biting their tongues.

Aside from when Helena got on their case. Neither of them were shy about telling her where to go—one couldn't be, or Helena would pounce, sensing weakness. Lily often found herself wondering why James didn't just bite the bullet and ask her to get a hold of herself, as it was clear from his limited interactions with the group that the only person he disliked more than Helena was Rita Skeeter. Helena had no concern for any of her fellow contestants, but there was a slim chance that she might actually listen to him.

In the meantime, the code was a blessed release.

A three-finger tap was simple—infer the opposite of what I'm saying until further notice. In the event that they were physically separated, scratching one's arm with three fingers worked just as well. On the other end of the scale, if Beatrice were to touch Lily's hair or double-tuck her own, it would be to indicate that she was being serious.

There were times when the code came in especially useful, and there were times when it wasn't needed.

As Lily stared at herself in one of the many floor-length mirrors that were dotted around the room, appalled by the dress they'd put her in for the photoshoot—virginal white, like all the others, yet split almost to the navel, displaying too much cleavage and far too much thigh through a skirt that was practically transparent—she figured that it really wouldn't be necessary to use the code. Beatrice could guess her feelings from the look on her face.
"I look..." Lily began, but couldn't find the words to demonstrate her horror.

"Gorgeous," said Beatrice, and spun her around. "Practice with me, darling."

Lily laughed, out loud this time, as her newest friend took her into her arms. "Practice what?"

"Slavish adoration."

"Not smoldering intensity?"

"A mixture of both would be ideal."

Lily gazed up at the taller woman with all the slavish, smoldering, intense adoration she could possibly muster. "Like this, you handsome hunk?"

Beatrice touched a hand to her cheek. "Chastity, my sweet meadow flower."

"Oh, Raoul," Lily sighed. "You are but a poor, penniless carpenter, and my father says we cannot be together, yet..."

"Come with me to my small woodworking shop, and make love to me on the crafting table."

Beatrice's eyes flicked off to the left. "He's looking at you."

Lily's eyes followed Beatrice's, and found James, who was hovering awkwardly by a light rigging while the production set up the next set piece—a long piece of wood that was clearly meant to resemble a dock, covered in tiny candles—in front of a green screen. He was ignoring whatever Helena was screeching in his ear, and, indeed, watching them practice for their respective shoots. He looked away as soon as she caught his gaze.

"He's looking at you," Lily countered, turning her attention back to her friend, "or both of us, whatever. He wouldn't be looking at all if Isabella were still here."

She had to remember to add more resentment to her tone when talking about James's obvious infatuation with Isabella, mindful of the many cameras in the room. Pretending to care was difficult.

Isabella had been the first person up for the shoot, and got the best costume deal in the form of an elegant white ball gown, which James had seemed happy about, at least until the cameras started rolling. Rita had instructed Isabella to fall to her knees, grab him round the waist, and stare up at him as if she was begging him not to leave her. She'd tried her best, but they were both too uncomfortable with the pose to make much headway at all.

To nobody's surprise, she had rushed off to "get changed" after her shoot and hadn't yet resurfaced. Stewing in one's own embarrassment took time.

Lily truly felt for the girl. There was a lot that she was willing to take for the sake of her job, but if Rita dared instruct her to do something so demeaning, even if just for a photograph, she would be hard pressed not to tell everyone involved with this hellish television show—minus Algernon, who found his way to her frequently, prompting many forcible removals and one very confused owner—to go fuck themselves as thoroughly as they possibly could.

Since the disastrous first shoot, James had cycled through two more. Valerie Turpin had spent fifteen minutes with her arms wrapped around his shoulders from behind, while he and Bonnie Grogan had been set to a pillow fight. That, at least, had seemed like it might be marginally fun, but from what Lily could see, the bachelor hadn't grown a mite more comfortable with the proceedings.
They kept taking his shirt off for the cameras, and he kept shoving it resolutely back on between sets.

"Please," Beatrice scoffed, keeping in character. "I give them one solo date before he goes off Isabella."

"You think?"

"Course I do. There's nothing really there."

"That's an awfully confident assessment of the situation, Raoul."

Beatrice shrugged, and for a moment, Lily couldn't gauge if she was serious or not. "I can always tell."

"Lily?" Rita called from near the photographer, peering at the clipboard in her hand from behind her bejeweled spectacles. "You're up! Shirt off, James."

Lily would have groaned, but that would have been too obvious, so she arranged her features into a tight smile and walked over to the makeshift dock that had been set up for her shoot, while a grumbling, stony-faced James pulled his shirt over his head. Sirius, who was sitting off camera with a paper coffee cup in his hand, thoroughly enjoying his friend's humiliation, let out a wolf-whistle.

James did not have a body like the men one normally saw on romance novel covers, which… wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

If she were under oath in a court of law, Lily would admit that she rather preferred a physique like his. Flat stomach. Nice shoulders. Even, brown skin.

If Lily had met him on a beach, or at a swimming pool, or any other location where it was acceptable for a man to walk around shirtless, she might have fancied him.

If he wasn't the bloody bachelor, Lily probably would have fancied him.

"You look great," said Rita as she approached, staring down at her clipboard. Lily doubted that Rita would notice if one of the other girls had walked over in her place.

"You're too kind, really," said Lily sweetly, and tossed James a perfunctory glance when he drew level with her. "Hello."

He scrubbed a hand through his hair. Both the hairstylist for the shoot and Camelia Pinkstone kept encouraging this, and Camelia made cloying, desperate eyes at him whenever he did so.

"Hi," he said, sounding exasperated. "Welcome to hell. Not what we expected, which is probably what we should have expected from, you know, hell."

Rita looked as if she was on the verge of saying something biting, but was called away by the photographer for some reason. After a low growl she took off in that direction, leaving Lily to make small talk.

She hated small talk, especially with James, because everything she felt devilishly compelled to say to him was something that probably would have got her kicked off the show immediately. Given his current mood, and his complete disinclination to act like any other bachelor in history and make so much as a passing attempt at charm, it seemed as if it wouldn’t take much to cause him offence.
"How’s my best friend doing?” she eventually settled on. His cat’s inexplicable love for her had become something of a talking point in the house, particularly since Algernon despised almost every other girl in the competition.

James crossed his arms. "Not bringing me a sandwich as I asked. That's how he's doing."

Great. Now she was thinking about sandwiches.

Rita insisted that the girls eat only fruit and porridge for breakfast, so that was what they were given.

Maybe she could pretend that James was a bacon sandwich during the photoshoot, so as to best embody the lustful gaze that Rita seemed so desperate for the girls to adopt.

"That’s—" Batshit insane. Selfish. An illogical demand to make of a creature that did not have opposable thumbs. Not for the first time, she wished that she could take Algernon off his hands. "Actually, he brought me a couple of flowers from the garden yesterday. Maybe he decided he was done with fetching after that."

"And you didn't even have to ask?"

She stared at him, but Rita spared her from thinking of a polite response—which here meant anything other than "how often were you dropped on the head as a child?"—by abruptly returning and seizing Lily’s arm, her long, claw-like fingernails digging so powerfully into her skin that puncture wounds seemed like a genuine possibility.

"You, here," she instructed, ignoring Lily’s yelp of pain. She practically forced her into a seated position on a candle-free stretch of the fake deck, her legs curling away to the right and her body turned to the left, leaning on her left hand. "Stay like that. Exactly like that." Rita straightened up, crooked a finger at James, then pointed to the spot to the left of Lily. "And you, sit here. Facing her. Same pose."

James muttered something indistinguishable under his breath, but if he’d ever had the fight required to go toe-to-toe with her, it must have recently left his body. He moved to follow her instructions, dropping to the ground next to her as if exhausted.

Rita ignored his unhappiness completely and stepped back to survey the scene, while the photographer lined himself up to start taking shots.

"Hmm," Rita said, cocking one head to the side. "Put your hand on hers."

James did, though not without an irritated sigh to indicate his displeasure. So much for being charming. Who knew the prospect of touching her would be so taxing?

Also, his hand felt about 100 degrees.

Lily was painfully aware of just how much of her body had been put on display by this stupid dress.

This was the stupidest bloody thing she had ever done in her life.

"No, move it a bit. It looks unnatural, just lying on top of hers like that," Rita declared, and the uncomfortably warm pressure shifted very slightly. "Your heads should be much closer together, and you should be looking at each other as if you’re madly in love and about to kiss, not at me or the camera."
It was Lily’s turn for an irritated sigh, but she had the self-control required to keep it to herself. Acutely aware that Beatrice was watching, and would certainly tease her later, she turned her head and looked at James.

They were already much too close for her liking, with only a couple of inches between their noses. Lily could make out every detail of his face. She shouldn’t have been able to do that.

She remembered, with quite a lot of resentment, that Isabella, Bonnie, and Valerie hadn’t needed to get nearly this close to his face.

"Not close enough," said Rita. "You know what, perhaps the two of you should just kiss—"

"No!" cried Lily loudly—so loudly that James was visibly startled—and without thinking. Rita’s eyebrows traveled swiftly up to her over-bleached hairline. "I…don’t like kissing people on camera?"

What a preposterous thing to say, given the nature of the show she was on.

"That won't be necessary," said Euphemia, who had strolled over and came to a neat stop next to Rita. Bonnie had said she was James’s mum, and there was admittedly some resemblance, but no grown man would allow his mum to watch him fail miserably at charming a dozen women.

James started to draw his hand off of Lily’s until Euphemia added, in a calm but subtly threatening way, "Don't you dare move, dear. Give it your best effort."

James grimaced and faced Lily. "The things we do for love," he muttered.

Lily’s journalistic instinct was to ask him to say more about that, but then he put on what he must have considered to be a very intense, adoring look…that in fact looked more like he had just eaten some Chinese food that he only now realized was extremely questionable.

She didn’t think she could have held in her laughter even if she’d had more warning. It burst out of her in a high-pitched squeal, and she had to duck her head for the sake of politeness, the hand that wasn’t on the ground and covered by his jumping up to shield her face.

"Evans!" Rita angrily screeched, like a teacher who had caught her writing notes in the back of class.

"I’m sorry!" Lily tried to respond, but it came out like a wail, because she was still laughing, the image of that ridiculous face he’d made apparently burned on the back of her eyelids. "I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—" She looked up at him again, noted his dumbfounded expression, and felt another knot of mirth swell up in her throat. "You look so stupid."

To her surprise, he let out a laugh. "Deepest apologies that I haven't mastered the art of lustily gazing into a stranger's eyes. It's on my to-do list, right after solving world hunger and finding a way to make sure people put the toilet roll on the right direction."

"Is that why you’ve had to come on the show?" she asked him, still giggling. Her cheeks were starting to warm. "Because you look at women like that, and it scares the crap out of them, so this is your last resort?"

"Mastering this is my duty as a man," he said solemnly.

His put-on seriousness only made her laugh more. "And here I thought for a moment that I’d disgusted you. It’s good to know that you’re just chronically bad with women."
Rita cleared her throat, prompting Lily's attention. The older woman glared pointedly at James from behind her sparkling spectacles. A vein was pulsing in her neck.

"Are you two quite finished acting like children?" she asked them icily.

Lily clamped her lips together to keep her laughter contained within her chest.

James grinned at her. "I think if we don't play along soon I'm going to turn up murdered in the morning. Help me out, yeah?"

"I'm so sorry," she said, with the briefest, most insincere apologetic look for Rita, and turned her attention back to James, returning his grin. He was kind of decent, when he wasn't in a sulk. "I can help you out by taking care of Algernon after your untimely passing?"

"Generous offer. I've been expecting my mum over there to do it, but you two could have a competition where he judges and decides who to live with—" He stopped and blanched. "Oh fuck. I've just invented the cat version of this show."

Lily let out another peal of laughter.

"Language!" Rita cried, and actually swatted the back of his head. Like he was a fly, or like she lived in a country where assault wasn't that big of a deal. It was a wonder his mother didn't leap to his defense, but she had wandered off to stand behind the camera and, Lily assumed, look at some proofs. "I need you both to take this seriously, or so help me, I'll—"

"Actually, Rita?" called the photographer—Lily had heard Rita refer to him as Bozo, but she hoped that it was a cruel nickname, not an actual, legal name that had been foisted upon him by even crueler parents—waving her over from behind his camera. "Come and take a look at these."

Rita snarled under her breath and pointed a stern finger at James. "I've got my eye on you," she warned, before turning on her heel and stomping off to see whatever it was that Bozo found so fascinating.

"If she does murder you, mate," said Lily to James, quietly, her amusement still clear in her voice, "I'll do my best to shove her out a window. That's what casual acquaintances are for, yeah?"

He winked at her. Or rather, he tried to wink but really just squeezed one side of his face to close one eye, while the other barely stayed open. "Cheers."

That made her laugh, again, for what seemed like the tenth time in a minute, because he was so weird, and that—especially considering the fact that he'd found her under a table on her first night—was the most unexpected development she had encountered so far. The men on these shows were usually so smooth, but James was positively dorky in comparison.

And, halt the presses, pretty bloody charming, when he felt like it.

"That's all, dear!" called Euphemia, now James's mother confirmed, from her spot next to Bozo. "You're all finished."

Lily tore her eyes from the ridiculous winking man before her to look at Euphemia, a slight frown creasing her forehead. "What—"

"We got the shots we needed," said Rita, though she sounded desperately unhappy about it.

"They're beautiful," said Euphemia proudly, and gave them both a thumbs up. "Nice and natural,
"Small miracles," put in Rita.

Lily could have jumped for joy. Somehow, she had been spared the indignity of an awkward and distinctly un-sexy spectacle, forever immortalized on film. "Oh."

"You can let her hand go now, James," said his mother.

He yanked his hand back from hers, then gave a shy smile. "Or, er. Yeah. Right. Ah, congrats on being done, Lily. Pet Algernon for me when you get the chance. He likes it best when you scratch his left ear, although he also likes to keep the attention mostly balanced between his ears."

"I already know that. What do you think I am, an amateur?" she replied with a comical roll of her eyes, and hopped to her feet. "I quite fancy a nap, actually. Oi, Rita?" Their scowling director looked over at the sound of her voice. "Can I go for a nap, please?"

"No."

"Well, I'm going for one anyway," she stubbornly retorted, and gave a still-sitting James a lazy wave. "Have fun with the rest of your shoots."

He didn't say anything else, but waved back, looking extremely pained by the prospect. For a moment she felt a warm, quasi-affectionate ember of pity stirring in the pit of her stomach. His overall discomfort was becoming increasingly more apparent as the show went on, and it wasn't particularly pleasant to witness. He clearly didn't want to be there. No sane man would want to spend an afternoon acting like Fabio Lanzoni.

On the other hand, he was also staying in a luxury suite while she and the other girls were consigned to the servants’ quarters.

And he had an awesome cat.

In any case, there was nothing that Lily could do to save him from the fate he'd chosen, so she turned and left before Rita could change her mind.

Perhaps she could bring Algernon along for her nap.

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After the photoshoot that would be James’s nightmare fodder for years to come, he tried three times to talk to his mum or any of his mates alone. But Rita and the other show staff might as well have thrown him in a cellar and locked the door, they were such masters of intervening whenever he tried to express what he was really thinking and feeling to someone he trusted.

It wasn’t because the staff adored his company. In fact, whenever they weren’t actively filming or lighting him, most of the crew treated him like he was Bruce Willis in The Sixth Sense, only James didn’t have a single sixth-sensed person to communicate with. Even Peter, dutiful and obedient as ever, always flicked scared eyes at Rita and said he couldn’t be with James alone.

Which was the whole point, of course: to get James to reveal himself on camera.

After all the girls had left, Rita plopped him on a stool in front of the last photo set. It wasn’t a backdrop he’d be keen to remember. He’d had to spend more than twenty minutes dipping Charlene "Leather Dress" Stebbins in front of a beach background because he kept accidentally dropping her.
"Right," Rita said, looking at her list. "Tell us about your last shoot with Charlene."

Unfortunately, the reality show staff knew what they were doing by isolating him—his thoughts slipped out more often than he’d have liked.

James mumbled his way through an answer about how Charlene had taken the dropping relatively well. She’d looked pretty peeved by the sixth time, but he couldn’t blame her. No one had asked him if he could hold a woman in that position for longer than a few seconds.

He also inadvertently let on that he’d been frustrated with Wendy "Magic Mirror" Wilde because she’d kept stopping to fuss with the curls around her face, and then how her dress neckline lay on her chest, and then how tight her boots were laced. The camera had probably picked up on the few eye rolls he hadn’t been able to suppress at the time.

Then he got too close to calling Camelia "Wandering Hands" Pinkstone aloud by his mental nickname. Instead he changed tactics mid-stream and called her "Wandering...Eyes," which was only a slight improvement.

Worst, he came too close to admitting how much he liked Isabella. She’d been cheery for the first couple minutes of the shoot, and had actually started to put him at ease, but then they’d gone and forced her to put her head directly in front of his crotch. No matter how much he liked her, she’d only known him a few days. It had taken a lot of calming looks from his mum in the distance to keep him from pushing Isabella away out of sheer discomfort.

Thankfully he was allowed to snag her first at the cocktail party the next night.

"I’m so sorry about the shoot," he said once they’d sat down in the admittedly gorgeous, ivy-covered grotto in the back garden. "That was dead uncomfortable for me, too."

She smiled at him, as she often did, and it hadn’t once failed to win a smile out of him in return. "It’s all right. It’s not like you chose that, either."

"No. No, I absolutely didn’t and wouldn’t have."

She picked up his hand and laid his palm over hers, twining her fingers through his. "Sometimes people like James Bond end up doing things they don’t necessarily want to because of the circumstances."

James couldn’t think of an example from any of the movies, but he ignored it. "Thanks for being understanding. I get why you ran off at the end."

"You’re so sweet." She squeezed his hand. "I feel like you really get me, you know?"

"Yeah. Yeah," he said, his heart thumping happily, "I feel like you get me, too."

"I never thought—I mean, obviously I signed up for this show, but I guess...seeing people on the other versions make such an instant connection, I thought it might have been staged."

"Possibly." James had never seen an episode, truthfully. "But I’m not—I’m not really great at faking that sort of thing."

She leaned in, resting her head on his shoulder. "Me neither."

He could have stayed there in that fairy-lit grotto for the rest of the night, the next few days, and then a few more for good measure. She just made him feel...calm. Being around her was easy.
Of course their time together couldn’t last, though. He had eight other women to see tonight.

Because Rita had a deep and obvious masochistic streak, she made him talk to Helena next.

Helena spent their time together fawning over his "stunning physique," and repeatedly stressing how natural it had felt to lay on a Regency-era bed, with her corset half undone and a shirtless James straddling her waist.

In at least half the pictures, he was certain he’d be accidentally staring at her chest. She’d kept shifting around, seemingly to make them jiggle.

In all of them, he was sure to look nauseated.

From there he had a decent conversation about careers with Bonnie "Irish Dancer" Grogan, a terrific one with Beatrice "Careless Whisper" Booth about the bakery her parents owned, and a less interesting and more one-sided one with Valerie "Few Words" Turpin (in which he continued to do most of the nervous rambling).

After that, Rita "encouraged" him to take Lily out by the era-inappropriate pool someone had installed. They settled in on the only pillow-laden loveseat amongst the many lounge chairs.

At least this conversation wouldn’t be exhausting. She’d actually been right fun at the shoot, although they’d had a much less intimate pose than the others.

He let himself sink back into the oversized pillows and exhaled deeply. "You doing alright, Evans?"

"Hmm?" Lily’s gaze had been drawn to one of the large bay windows at the back of the castle, and following it, he saw Beatrice, who had pressed herself against the glass and was making faces at her. "Yeah, sorry." Her eyes flicked back to the window again, and she suppressed a laugh. "I’m great, thank you."

He smiled. "You and Beatrice friends, then?"

"I love her," said Lily warmly, "which sounds like hyperbole, I know, and everyone but Helena is lovely, but I already know that she’ll be the one person I keep in touch with after this is all done."

"I know what you mean," he sighed happily.

"I feel like she’s the only person I can be myself around, you know?" Lily continued, waving at the window. Beatrice blew her an airy kiss. "She’s funny, and she’s wicked smart, and, okay, I’m biased, but definitely the prettiest girl in this house." She paused for a moment. "God, I’m starting to sound like I’m in love with her."

"That would be the best twist, actually, so if that’s how it’s going I say go for it."

"I mean, I would, but I’m already planning to run away with the true love of my life, Algernon," she said, and laughed. "And I’ve been cursed to find men attractive, which is just the worst, honestly."

"It’s true. People attracted to women have really got the better end of things. Women are just…” He thought of the way Isabella had fitted so nicely to his side earlier, and been sweet and understanding and genuine. Women made close friends of each other in a way most men didn’t and were generally dead supportive of each other, unlike James’s traitorous friends who savored his current torture. There weren’t words for how great women were, but James had to finish his thought
so he added lamely, "They're brilliant."

"Except Rita, which I can say, because they can’t air it," said Lily dryly. And then, with a burst of fervor he hadn’t expected, she added, "The way she treats you really pisses me off, you know. Someone ought to teach her a lesson."

James’s chest filled with warmth. Finally, someone was on his side. Someone had the guts to say it, and with Rita right there, too.

Lily Evans had been one of the most attractive girls from the start, with those stunning eyes and that smile that seemed to keep taunting him to keep up with her.

He could have just said "thank you," but she would match him if he went one better.

He nicked his head toward the producer stalking toward them from the other side of the pool. "As Rita is right behind you, and she knows where I live now and in general, I am obligated to say 'no comment.'" Then he said, with true conviction, "And thank you."

"No problem." She smiled at him, then landed a soft, friendly pat on his hand. "We all need mates, right? Even super handsome bachelors with scores of women fighting over them. Plus, I’m counting on you to keep me and Bea together for as long as you possibly can."

He double-blinked when she called him super handsome. She probably meant it as a joke.

He gestured at the two cameras, which pointed directly at them from about ten feet away, the pool light reflecting in their lenses. "You're sure you want to stick around for this?"

"You forget," she said, and pointed to the house, or really, at Algernon, who had slipped outside and was perched by the patio door, watching them both expectantly, "I met the love of my life on day one, and speaking of…"

She climbed to her feet and shot a tight smile at Rita, who stopped by the loveseat, looking furious.

"I heard that," said Rita coldly. "You need to start watching your mouth, girl."

"Deeply sorry, your highness. I’ll go think on my sins now," Lily sweetly replied with a neat curtsy, then turned on her heel and gestured for the cat to join her. "Come along, darling. Rita needs privacy to torture your human."

Algernon darted over at once—already more obedient for Lily than he ever had been for James—and she scooped him up in her arms. He settled against her chest with the happiest of purrs.

"Bye, Potter," she called over her shoulder, retreating towards the house. She spun in an elegant little circle right before she reached the patio doors, then disappeared inside.

As much of a horror as it was being on this show, at least he’d met some fantastic women in the process. Not just Isabella, but Beatrice and Bonnie and Lily. They were lovely and nice and fun to be around. Lily in particular was dead clever and funny.

While Rita scolded him, he debated sending Lily home during the ceremony because she was too good for this place.

That said, she could leave whenever she felt like it. And he would never force a girl to do something she didn’t want to do, even if he didn’t understand why the hell someone would voluntarily stay in proximity to people like Helena and Rita.
Then again, he thought as he watched Lily and Algernon appear beside Beatrice in the window, some people were definitely worth sticking around for.

"I've got eyes on him," said Beatrice urgently, and grabbed Lily by the elbow to spin her around, evidently not caring that she was mid-conversation with Wendy and Charlene. "Grand piano, right ahead."

Thankfully, the champagne glass Lily was holding was empty, as she had elected to indulge in a tippie that evening, albeit lightly. Had it been full, her favorite blue dress would have been sadly ruined.

"Careful!" she scolded. "You can't just pull me away from conversations, it'll look suspicious."

"Why? We're not doing anything wrong."

"Great. You can explain that to Rita when you see her."

"Forget Rita for now. Eyes on the prize, Evans."

"Eyes on the prize," Lily softly repeated, setting her empty glass on the mantle of the ornate fireplace they were gathered beside. It wouldn't do to waste such a rare opportunity to snag a moment alone with the man she needed to see. "Let's go."

With a quick goodbye to Wendy and Charlene, she and Beatrice breezed across the room, nodding at one another as if engaged in a fascinating conversation and throwing in a few tinkling laughs, here and there. No subterfuge here. Scheme-free zone. Zero shenanigans afoot. Rita and most of the crew were focused on the fit Helena was throwing over how grim James looked in their cover shoot. This was Lily's and Beatrice’s best shot at achieving their goal.

Beatrice was right: they technically weren’t doing anything that wasn’t allowed, but Rita would have taken some issue with it. Rita took some issue with everything.

Luckily, she and Bea had gotten quite good at playing along with all of the nonsense, especially since they had both found such a capable scene partner in the other.

When they drew near to the piano—which Lily was itching to play, but not with ten cameras pointed at her head—they split off to either side and converged around their mark, each approaching him with the same adoring, blatantly false smile.

"Peter," said Lily.

"Peter," Beatrice seconded. "Looking foxy today, I see."

Peter, the show’s gaffer, also known as Scrimgeour's inside accomplice and Lily's phone smuggler, nearly dropped the clipboard he was holding.

"Hel—hello, ladies," he said, looking from one to the other like a frightened mouse. Lily had learned from the moment she met Peter, thanks in no small part to his bright red face and nervous squeaking, that he went a little to pieces around women. It was most unfortunate for him, but worked to her advantage in this case.

Not that she would normally condone such subtle manipulations, but tonight's buffet table had pushed her and Beatrice to their respective limits.
"Pete, sweetheart," she began, "do you think you could do us a favor?"

"A really tiny favor?" said Beatrice.

"We'd be ever so grateful."

"Incredibly grateful."

"More grateful than you could ever imagine."

"I could—okay," said Peter, looking dazed. "What do you need?"

Lily smiled brightly at him, and tucked a loose curl behind her ear. "You're an angel, honestly. Do you think you could order us some food?"

Peter's eyes strayed towards the buffet table. "But—"

"Nice food," Beatrice clarified. "Not wilting lettuce. We're not rabbits."

"We were thinking about McDonald's," said Lily. "You've got Uber Eats on your phone, right?"

Peter nodded. That dazed expression still hadn't left his face.

"Great," she carried on. "Now, I can't possibly explain how I know this, but it just so happens that the McDonald's near here does deliver via Uber Eats, and as you know, we're not in possession of our phones—"

"Two sad, phone-less girls, we are."

"—and I'd be ever so grateful if you could order me a Chicken Legend with spicy mayo, in a meal, with a large Coke."

"Two large Cokes," said Beatrice. "And a cheeseburger. No, two cheeseburgers. I could go for two."

"And a chicken nugget share box."

"Oh, I almost forgot the share box!"

"Right," said Peter blandly. "Right."

"Once I get kicked off the show and can actually have my things again, I'll pay you back for it," Lily promised, landing the tips of her fingers briefly on his arm to demonstrate the sincerity of this vow. "Do you need us to repeat that?"

"Oh, no, I think I've got it," said Peter. "Two cheeseburgers, one Chicken Legend meal with spicy mayo, a chicken nugget box, and two large Cokes, right?" He looked from Lily to Beatrice, then back again. "Anything else?"

"No," said Lily, but then added, "Actually, yes. Could you also get a large fries on their own?"

"Fries come with your meal," said Beatrice.

"I know that," she said, vexed and confused to find herself feeling uncomfortably warm in the face. "They're for James, not me."
Beatrice immediately adopted a knowing expression. "Ooh la, really? What prompted this?"

Lily delicately ignored her tone. "He’s having a rough time, I think," she explained, "and anyway, he asked me for them."

"When did he ask?"

"Back when—" Lily started, then stopped, unwilling to explain the whole conversation they’d had on the first night. "I dunno, a while ago, doesn’t matter. I’m just trying to be nice."

"I think you’re nice," said Peter hopefully.

"Sure," said Beatrice, and waved him away. "Can you put that order in now? Thanks a bunch, mate."

Peter took out his phone and strolled off while Lily cocked an eyebrow at Beatrice. A slow and deeply amused smile was spreading across her friend’s face, and though Lily felt rather inclined to shove her at the wall and tell her to shut up having thoughts that she could read, that would have been unduly childish, and incriminate her, besides.

Incriminate her…for having a crush on a bloke she was supposed to be pretending to fancy, a crime she wasn’t even guilty of in the first place.

She’d formed a fondness, though.

A little fondness.

Really, it was merely an inkling of platonic affection, and even that was overshadowed by her professional interest in discovering why he’d ever signed up for the show when it was so clear that he didn’t want to be there. It was slowly becoming a point of immense fascination.

Lily had been getting tidbits from the girls over the past few days, and a lot of it was workable, but if she could get something from James—something that might expose an as-of-yet undiscovered, seedy underbelly to the whole thing—that would be the cherry on top of the cake.

She’d seek his consent to publish it, as she had with Beatrice, and Lucinda, while she was packing her things to leave, but something told her that he might not mind slamming Rita and her production once he was safely out of the house.

In the meantime, she could get him some damn fries because he seemed like a nice chap, and he deserved a bit of kindness.

Lily could freely admit to liking him, and had done so earlier that very evening, in one of the stupid confession-cam sessions that Rita forced her into. For the sake of maintaining her thin ruse, she’d left the "as a friend" part out of her confessional, focusing mostly on the nice conversations they’d been having, and just a little bit on his hair (which was fantastic).

Evidently, she’d done too good a job at sounding infatuated, for Rita had "encouraged" her to start interrupting his conversations with other girls, while Beatrice was now having "inklings" that Lily and James "had something between them."

"See?!" Bea had cried out, shortly before the cocktail party had begun, when the nine remaining girls were ushered into the room to find that the best shot from each individual contestant’s shoot had been blown up and positioned on easels. "Yours is easily the best photo—"
That would have been impossible to argue down. She and James had taken the best photo of the
day, but only because theirs was a candid shot, taken by Bozo when both of them were laughing at
the stupidity of it all. Every other picture was so awkwardly posed.

"—and I think you two have got chemistry," Beatrice had concluded, even though Isabella had
been standing mere feet away, overheard the whole thing, and was visibly bothered by it.

Rita had cackled.

Meanwhile, Lily had felt compelled to apologize at once, but Beatrice had not, pointing out that
they were all in the same boat, and that Isabella had known what she was signing up for when
she’d joined the show. It was lucky that James made a beeline for Isabella as soon as he arrived at
the party, putting the lovestruck girl at ease. Lily was in no mood for her to overhear any other bits
of conversation that might upset her.

Isabella was sweet, though a little less fun than Beatrice and Bonnie. She didn’t deserve to have her
feelings messed with by Rita, or by anyone else.

"Let’s go back to the others," Lily said to avoid any further ribbing on the matter. "I want to hear
Charlene finish her story about the Norwegian leather industry."

As it happened, the inner workings of the Norwegian leather industry prompted far more
explanation than Lily and Beatrice had expected. Charlene’s love of motorcycles and anything
related, including the source of her motorcycle gear, far exceeded any passion Lily had ever had in
her life. She was still cycling through the details of a specific tanning method when Peter appeared
in the room with two large brown paper bags in his arms, beckoning to Lily and Beatrice to join
him in the corner. It was quite a relief to escape her rambling tale for the sake of getting a
McDonald’s. Lily regretted encouraging Charlene to talk about it in the first place.

"Amazing, Peter," she said, once the gaffer had deposited their food into her loving embrace.
"You’re a superstar."

"The absolute best," said Beatrice thickly, having already shoved a chicken nugget into her mouth.

Peter beamed with pride.

"Could you take this from me and bring it to the nearest available flat surface?" Lily asked
Beatrice, shifting everything but one carton of fries into her friend’s arms. James was outside, stuck
in the grotto with Helena, who knew how to cling to an unwilling victim better than a leech to an
open wound. "I just need to give these to James."

She felt oddly excited by the prospect of surprising him.

It was probably her nature speaking. She loved buying gifts for people, even if the best she could
muster in her luxurious prison was cheap junk food that she’d have to spot Peter for later.

Happily, Lily got to fully enjoy the experience of surprising her new almost-friend with what she
hoped were his long-coveted fries. He was sitting with his back to her, so he didn’t actually notice
that she was there until she was right behind him.

"Hi there!" she sang with an apologetic smile for Helena, who looked utterly disgusted to have
been disturbed after cornering James for a second time that night. James turned around at the sound
of her voice. "Nice night, isn’t it?"

"Lily," said James, looking up at her with an expression that said he was in desperate need of
rescuing, and she was his only hope. "Hi."

"What do you want?" said Helena icily.

"I’m super sorry to interrupt your lovely chat, but I wanted to deliver these personally," Lily replied, smiling as if she hadn’t heard Helena speak. She held out the bright red carton for James to take, and his eyes widened in surprise. "Just, y’know, in case you were hungry."

He blinked at her offering, then sniffed loudly and looked upward. "Dear Santa, this wasn't quite the salvation I asked for, but I appreciate your generosity all the same. I continue to be your humble servant." He brought his gaze down to Lily. "Those are real McDonald’s fries, right?"

"No, it's the one ring to rule them all," she said dryly, then laughed, giving the carton a quick shake. "Go on, take them. I promise they’re not poisoned."

Helena looked as if she was suffering a severe cardiac arrest.

James took the proffered fries from her and quickly shoved several in his mouth, as though someone were coming to steal them at any second. And from the producer’s startled and confused face, it seemed like a definite possibility. Rita’s subordinate stood there flipping through paper on a clipboard, as though searching for what to do when one of the contestants sneaked brand name, illicit food to the bachelor.

"This is why women are great," he said through a mouth full of fries. "Fuck men. Women are brilliant."

Lily’s cheeks heated. "I just felt like doing something kind."

"Oh sure, you’re just being kind," said Helena derisively. Her arms were folded so tightly across her chest that Lily imagined she might discover a need to untangle them like a twisted necklace. "This is my time with him, Evans. Stop encroaching on my territory."

This was such a ludicrous assessment of Lily’s behavior that she snorted—loudly, unattractively—and briefly fantasized about grabbing Helena by the back of her dress and throwing her boldly into the pool.

"Bloody hell, calm down, Magellan," she said, to which Helena gasped as if she’d been shot in the chest. James gave a sudden, choked laugh. "I’m not trying to steal him away. I just wanted to drop those off, and now I’m leaving."

She moved to escape what would surely be a violent and tragic death, courtesy of Helena, and return to the castle to enjoy her own well-earned meal, but James’s free hand shot out and closed around hers before she could take a step.

"You could stay, if you want." The look in his eyes was so clear and pathetic—Helena is a psycho, I’m terrified, please don’t leave me alone with her—that her heart went out to him. "Are you hungry? You're welcome to have no more than half of these." He looked down. "I might’ve eaten half already, though, so you can have a quarter of them—"

"What about me?" Helena yelped, at the same time Lily said, "I’ve got my own food, actually, so I don't—"

"Do you want to bring it over here?" he said to Lily.

"No, honestly, it’s fine, I wouldn’t want to inter—"
"Five minutes to the ceremony, mate," said Sirius, who had appeared on the scene, clad in a dark grey suit. "Rita wants you to go—where did you get fries?"

"From the depths of hell where you left me," said James. He nodded at Lily. "From my new best mate, of course. Easier to fill your overly large shoes than you expected, eh?"

"Oh, right," said Sirius, squinting at all three of them in the fading evening light. "Is that why you're holding hands?"

James dropped Lily's hand as if it had scalded him.

"I assume he needs to go and 'decide' who he's booting out, right?" said Lily to Sirius, who let out a sharp laugh. She decided to take that as confirmation of her theory that James had little to no real control, and pointed a warning finger at his fries. "Bring those with you, eat them right in front of her face, and if she tries to take them away, tell me and I'll start plotting a long and complicated revenge."

He stared at her in awe. "Aye aye, captain." Then he shoved another handful of fries into his mouth and stood up. "Tragic to cut this short," he said to a speechless-with-rage Helena, "but a higher duty calls. Not Santa, unfortunately." Then he added, seemingly to himself, "If only."

Sirius loped an arm around his shoulder and started drawing him away. "We've talked about this, mate—you're too tall for an elf."

James cast a last smile over his shoulder at Lily as they walked toward the castle.

"Well," said Helena loftily, interrupting Lily's half-formed thought about how cute it was that James was a fully grown man who still talked to Santa, "I would have expected this behavior from the others, but not from you."

Lily rolled her eyes. "Will you shut up if I split my chicken nuggets with you?"

Helena thought about this for a moment. "Yes."

"Come on, then," she wearily instructed, and led the way back into the house, where she found her dinner on the coffee table. Beatrice was sitting on the floor with Remus, laughing uproariously at whatever he had just been saying.

Her hand was resting on his forearm.

Trust Beatrice to try to pick up one of the hosts of the show on camera.

"There you are!" she cried gaily, waving a nugget in the air. "Is James in love with you yet?"

Lily felt Helena tense beside her, and ignored it. "Eat fast," she advised, dropping to the floor. "Ceremony is in five."

"On that note, I should go and get ready," said Remus. He stood up and dusted salt off his trousers. "Lovely speaking with you, Beatrice."

"You too."

"And thank you for the nuggets," he added, before heading out of the room.

Lily gaped at her. "You gave him some of our nuggets?"
"I was just being polite!" Beatrice retorted, and tapped Lily's arm with three fingers, though it wasn't necessary when the reasoning behind her decision was so blatantly obvious. She jerked her head towards Helena. "What's she doing with you?"

"Lily said I could have some of her nuggets," said Helena.

"Hypocrite!" Beatrice cried.

"I was buying her silence," Lily protested, reaching for some fries of her own. "Bugger off."

When James was brought back into the room to begin the ceremony, wearing a veneer of cheerful cordiality that did a poor job of hiding his obvious anger, Lily could tell instantly that he'd been argued down on something. Her suspicions were proved correct as soon as the ceremony started, for Helena became the first girl of the night to receive a rose.

Tragically, or hilariously, Helena was not aware of the large ketchup stain on the front of her dress when she walked up to collect it, but Lily knew that the cameras were.

In the end, and because Lucinda Zheng's abrupt departure earlier in the week dictated that only one girl be eliminated, instead of the planned-for two, it was Camelia Pinkstone who got the chop. Lily was called up for a rose after Isabella and before Beatrice, and couldn't help but feel a little pleased to receive a far warmer offer, and smile, than the one he'd given Helena.

"I mean, I'd prefer some fries, if you have any," she told him, once he asked her to accept the rose, and took it from his outstretched hand, "but if this is the best you can do, then sure."

He laughed at that, and she smiled in response.

He was a good guy, this James Potter. Not a puffed-up product of the patriarchy, as she had so thoughtlessly assumed, before she'd taken the time to know him a little. She'd been entirely wrong about that. James was a dork. A sweetheart. Surprisingly easy to talk to. A mate.

Maybe Beatrice wasn't the only person she'd want to keep in touch with, once this was all over.
On the day of James’s one-on-one date with Isabella, he woke up smiling.

Then Algernon jumped on his chest, pushing all the air in James’s lungs out in one painful exhalation.

When he’d recovered, he knocked Algernon off. Gently, of course, but enough to get him to move onto the bed.

"What the hell was that for?" James demanded. This was the agreed-upon technique to wake James up when he was super late to work—which was admittedly more often than it should have been—but they had at least an hour until James had set an alarm.

Algernon gave him a look that James did not understand at all. It wasn’t his feed me face or his what the hell have you done face. It wasn’t even his you’re an idiot face.

"After you master fetching," James told him, climbing out of bed, "we’ll have to work on spelling."

Algernon’s weirdness aside, the day continued in James’s favor. Euphemia encouraged Rita to ride in the car with Isabella on the way to the date. Remus, the host for the day, generously offered to ride with them, no doubt to soften Rita’s insanity.

James saluted him when Rita’s back was turned. Finally, some semblance of friendship, even if it was taking care of James’s girl and not James himself.

This left the other producer, a completely bland man James kept forgetting existed, and his mum in the other car. The forced gender separation was crazy archaic.

Once they’d settled in, the producer up front and James and his mum in back, James let his head fall sideways onto Euphemia’s shoulder and sighed. She started stroking her hand through his hair and hummed.

"My sweet boy," she said. "I know this is a lot for you, but I’ve been watching some of the early episode cuts and they’re brilliant." She dropped her hand and bent down to press a kiss to his head. "Best television I’ve ever seen."

"I find that hard to believe," James muttered.

"You know I live for the drama."

He sighed again. "I do. God, I do."

"I know you’re indulging me, but it is a bit fun being on the show, isn’t it?"

"You mean when they pulled that cruel stunt on Lucinda?"
"Obviously not—"

"Or when Helena shoves her bosom against me without my consent?"

"Certainly there have been downsides—"

"Or every night when I sleep in a stuffy room that smells of cabbage?"

"They did try to fix that," she reminded him. Then she kissed him again. "It’s a lot, I know. But you like some of the girls, don’t you?"

"I mean...yes," he conceded. "There are, er, certain women present who...are, eh...yeah." He pulled his head back to sit straight up and stared out his window, his face flushing.

"It does seem like one is really a good fit for you."

He nodded, still not looking at her. "Obviously. And some will be good mates."

"But?" his mum prompted.

But he felt like he’d been sold to the devil, or at least loaned. He had no privacy and couldn’t use his phone and they kept forcing him to spend time with people he was not remotely interested in. Every second that he was not with Isabella was like walking around with a spotlight. He hadn’t been able to be fully honest in days and his true thoughts were about to burst out any moment.

But he loved his mum, and she walked around the sets practically giddy with excitement, and whatever, he had agreed to do this for her and now he was in it.

"But nothing," he said. "Glad it’s Isabella’s day."

"Don’t talk too much about the girls," the producer said from the front seat.

Euphemia reached over and patted James’s knee. "It makes for the best television."

But not for her son’s happiness, he mentally added, and stared out the window.

If he’d had the date with anyone but Isabella, he might’ve actually run off set. But it was finally time for them to spend quality time by themselves. No risk of some other woman barging in and prying him away for some alone time.

Probably not, at least, but he scoped out the date site for Helena Hodge all the same. She couldn’t be trusted not to have snuck into the boot or something. She was wily enough that if faced with the roadrunner, she might’ve actually caught him.

At least this date was more normal than the others: he and Isabella had been brought to an archery range to learn a new skill. From the moment Remus explained the date and walked off-camera, James’s world narrowed down to Isabella Marks. She’d pulled her dark hair back into a ponytail, and wore a bright pink tank top that showed off her wonderfully toned arms.

"Hi," he breathed, stepping closer to her.

She beamed up at him. "Hi."

He brought his hand forward to hold hers, and was just debating asking whether he could kiss her cheek when a sharp voice said, "Let’s get started."
James jerked back from Isabella, dropping her hand, and quickly checked the surroundings. Still no Helena, thankfully. Just a grey-haired woman with square glasses, a stern look, and a bow half as tall as James in her hand.

"Er, hi," he said.

"I’m Professor McGonagall," she said, "and I’ll be teaching you the graceful and celebrated art of archery."

"Professor?" James blurted.

McGonagall arched an eyebrow. "Did I lack enunciation?"

"Nope," he said, shoving his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. "You absolutely did not."

Isabella smiled at McGonagall because she was a dear. "It’s such a pleasure to meet you."

McGonagall harrumphed. "Were it not for my long-term friendship with Euphemia Potter, I would never have allowed such a despicably misogynistic circus onto my field. The sooner we’re done, the better."

James silently hurrahed for McGonagall, at least until he remembered this would be his only uninterrupted time with Isabella for some time.

"Right," James said. "Er, archery, then?"

McGonagall nodded and spun around. "Follow me."

Isabella took James’s hand and together they followed McGonagall to a rack of bows. McGonagall fitted James for one first, and then focused on Isabella. When she turned around, James had already picked up an arrow and turned toward a haystack bearing a paper target.

"I’ve done this before," he said, holding up the bow and cocking an arrow toward the target. "My mum took me once when I was fifteen. Then my dad found out and banned us from going back."

"And I once rode an elephant in India," McGonagall said, yanking his arrow downwards, "but you’ll find that ten years later I didn’t claim I could single-handedly wrangle one myself."

James let out a loud laugh.

"These are serious weapons," McGonagall said, "not a Rubik's cube one can simply ‘figure out’ as they go along. Understanding the rules of safety is critical before either of you point an arrow anywhere."

"Excuse me, Professor," James said innocently, "but isn’t an arrow pointed toward the ground still pointed somewhere? How do we hold an arrow so that it’s pointed nowhere at all?"

McGonagall’s lips twitched. "Continue with that attitude, Mr. Potter, and I’ll separate the two of you for private lessons."

James snapped his back straight and gave her a curt, militaristic nod. "Yes, Ma'am."

McGonagall’s mouth gave another twitch. "I’ve left the arm guards in the barn. While I fetch them, arrows stay pointed toward the ground or, ideally, in no one’s hands at all."

James maintained his tense look and barked out, "Aye aye, General!"
"That nonsense should also depart by the time I return," she said with a hint of a smile, and strode away.

Once McGonagall was a ways off, Isabella turned to James. "She’s a bit...direct, isn’t she?"

James frowned. "What makes you say that?"

"She’s so… I dunno. She gives out a lot of orders, and I…I like when people say things nicer, is all."

"Er," he said dumbly, "yeah. Sure."

"I’ve just always found that the best teachers are—well. Really kind, and gentle, and patient."

"Absolutely." He reached out and rubbed her shoulder. "We’ll get through it, though. And maybe when we’re done we can steal a bow and arrow."

She blinked her big dark eyes at him. "What for?"

*To terrorize Helena off the show* was the obvious answer, but Isabella was too sweet to ever think of such a thing.

He smiled at her. "I don’t even know," he said. "To teach the others?"

"Yeah," she said happily. "So they can have some of the adventure from today, too."

"Exactly what I meant." He let his arm slide around her shoulders, and she made a contented noise. "I’m so glad we’re here together."

She strained up on her toes and pecked his cheek, blushing. "Yeah," she said. "Me too."

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One-on-one date days were the best days.

Lily and Beatrice had learned as much when James and Lucinda were whisked away for their ill-fated "cooking class," because Rita, Euphemia, and several members of the production staff went along with them, and the whole thing took several hours longer than any future viewer might have suspected.

Those of Rita’s team who stayed behind at the castle were not quite as enthusiastic, or evil, as their almighty leader. While the girls were still expected to spend many hours in the common areas, being monitored, recorded, and occasionally prodded to fabricate feuds, the general running of things was a little more lax.

Specifically, they got to sleep in a little later, and spend a bit more time without microphones clipped to their clothes outside of the top floor, which in a short amount of time had become a fabulous luxury. Lily was sick to death of being escorted to the toilet by a sound manager between the hours of eight a.m. and midnight, just so her mic could be switched off before she relieved herself.

She had once considered just running off to pee, when she was really desperate and couldn't find any of the sound guys—the rules were strict on who could and could not touch a microphone—but she didn't trust that Rita wouldn't use the audio. Instead, Lily had held it in for such an uncomfortably long time that she began to fear she'd get a urinary tract infection.

The glamorous side of reality television, indeed.
"So, I'm in this amphitheater," Beatrice was saying on the morning of James's date with Isabella, at the gloriously late hour of ten a.m., while she painted her toenails on the bed and Lily straightened her hair in front of the vanity. "And Jon Snow is there—"

"The fictional character, or the newscaster?" Lily interrupted.

"I meant the character," Beatrice clarified. "Like, it's Kit Harington, except he's in costume, so in the dream I knew he was Jon Snow, not Kit, and he's trying to convince me to join this motorcycle gang, but I know that this cloak is killing people, and I try to tell him but he won't believe me, and then the cloak swallows him whole, and then I woke up."

"That's so cheering."

"I know, right?" Beatrice leaned back against her headboard to examine her toes. "I swear my dreams are getting stranger since we moved in here. I think it's the musty garret air."

"Or the constant breakfast mimosas," Lily reminded her. Rita's desire to see her contestants consume minimal calories throughout the day did not extend to the drinks they were served. Drunk women made for better television, as a couple of the girls had already proved. "I had a sex dream last night, weirdly."

"About who?"

Lily used the hair straighteners to point towards the floor, indicating the lower levels of the castle. "Him."

"James?"

"Mmhmm."

"You dirty bitch."

"I think we were in a lake, or something?" Lily recalled, fiddling with a strand of hair near her temple that was staunchly refusing to lose its natural kink. The show's rules also stated that all contestants be made up and styled when on camera, so she was forced to go through this process every morning. "Or a river, or—I dunno, we were outside, and there was water, and—"

"That sounds so unhygienic."

"I know!" Lily nodded at Beatrice in the mirror. "What the hell, brain? Who would actually do that? It's filthy andlogically unsound."

Beatrice laughed. "Was it a good dream, though?"

"Oh, definitely. Woke up super frustrated."

"Can I tell him about it?"

"I mean, I can't stop you from telling him, but I can definitely hurt you after," said Lily lovingly, with an angelic smile to undercut the threat, just as a knock sounded on their bedroom door. She slipped her phone, which was resting next to her hairbrush, beneath a hand towel. "Could you get that, babe?"

"Come in!" Beatrice cried, wiggling her toes.

The door was pushed open from the outside and Bonnie Grogan entered the room, still dressed in
her pajamas, her hair a beautiful mess of thick black curls.

Lily and Beatrice were fans of Bonnie, and she of them.

"Morning," she said thickly, and shuffled over to Lily's bed. She threw herself upon it unceremoniously, and with a loud huff. "I'm so bloody exhausted."

"Why?" said Beatrice.

"The fan in my room is broken," she explained. "I've been sweating like a pig all night."

The weather had been extremely hot recently, even for summer, and nowhere was hotter than the top floor of the house, where no one had ever thought to install an air conditioning unit. After a couple of uncomfortable nights, the girls had been given large electric fans for their bedrooms to keep them from quitting the show in an en masse revolt, though Rita had been overheard calling them all weak for refusing to simply put up with the sweltering conditions.

"Oh God, that sounds like the worst," said Lily softly. She and Bonnie both had fair, freckled skin, and an intolerance to heat. "Did you ask someone for a new one?"

"I did, yesterday, and I was told I'd get one right away, but..." Bonnie shrugged her shoulders, and rolled onto her side. "You know what they're like here. I'll get one next week, if I'm lucky."

**Contestants are forced to sleep in cramped, mildewed hot-boxes at the height of a July heat wave, denied immediate and much-needed access to fans or air conditioning after a long day of desperately fighting for dominance over their bursting bladders, while the bachelor and the production crew enjoy the freedom of a fully air-conditioned mansion.**

Her article was practically writing itself at this point. Lily could almost see the indictment etched in the mirror, and she might have been more excited about it, were she not so irritated by Bonnie's situation. "That's completely unacceptable, Bon."

"It wasn't so bad."

"No, I mean it, they can't just ignore your needs when they've put you in an environment that might make you sick—"

"It's alright, really—"

"No, it's not," Lily insisted, and twisted around in her chair so she could look at Bonnie directly, not through a mirror. "I'll talk to Rita when she gets back, or better yet, I'll talk to Euphemia. She's more likely to do something about it."

"Why didn't you just come in here last night?" said Beatrice. "Lily and I could have top-and-tailed."

"I would have, but Isabella came into my room to get away from Helena," said Bonnie. She had been bunking with Camelia, but had a bedroom to herself now that the other had left. "I didn't want to tell her to leave, and she didn't seem to mind the heat." She sighed. "We didn't stop talking until after two a.m., at least."

"About what?" said Lily, at the same time as Beatrice said, "Why didn't you tell her to shut her face?"

"I've spent the last four years not telling kids to shut their faces when it's all I've wanted to do, and
Isabella's a whole lot nicer than most kids," said Bonnie. Her eyelids had begun to droop. "Teaching gives you a certain type of patience."

"Isabella is twenty-eight, not a child," said Beatrice.

"I know, but she's so sweet, and she was so excited about her date with James, and Helena was being such a bitch about it that she got a little upset."

Beatrice snorted derisively. "Her date."

Lily said nothing, and turned back to the mirror. Her mind was still on her article, which was starting to become more of a Rita Skeeter character assassination than a look behind the scenes.

If anyone deserved it, Rita was the one.

Lucinda Zheng had been worth her weight in gold on her last day in the house. Lily had gone to see her as she packed her things, figuring she could trust Lucinda with her secret in exchange for exposure in her piece, and her instincts had proved correct. Not only did the model confess that her sole motivation in entering the contest had been to expand her social media sphere, the dirt she'd spilled on the cold, cruel way in which Rita and the production team had treated her after the ill-natured "prank" they'd pulled fit precisely with the picture Lily was trying to paint with her article. She and the others were cattle for slaughter, and not much else.

"James was the only one who was nice to me," Lucinda had said, while she shoved her Urban Decay products into a tote bag. "He was, like, genuinely upset about the whole thing. I don't think he knew too much about it until it happened."

Lily was starting to find herself disproportionately and repeatedly relieved by that particular tidbit of information whenever she read over the notes she had typed into her phone. Rita was enough of a villain all by herself without adding the bachelor to her ugly dogpile.

Having confirmation from Lucinda and Beatrice regarding their motives for signing up to the show, as well as their permission to share said motives, was excellent. Her own experience as a contestant had given her so much more—the strictly imposed curfew, slim opportunities for bathroom breaks, calorie deprivation, even the promise of regular counseling sessions that hadn't yet been fulfilled because "nobody needs it yet"—but to top it all off, most importantly, she had a head showrunner from hell. One who chided, taunted, and physically abused the contestants, and even the star of the show.

Rita had smacked James upside the head, for crying out loud. Lily didn't care if she'd been a family friend of the Potters for decades before his birth and felt perfectly free to swat at him without fear of repercussions—that didn’t fucking fly with her.

Thinking of it made her angry.

She wondered why Euphemia didn't put a stop to it. James was her son, after all, and Lily had heard something from Wendy about the Potters providing a tied-in advertising deal with the company they owned. She likely had some sway over Rita.

Then again, Lily didn't think Euphemia knew the full extent of what Rita was doing. Though she was always behind the camera for the solo and group dates, as well as the cocktail parties, there were many more hours in a day. The girls weren't allowed to see James for most of them, save rare occasions where Rita wanted to shoot more footage, but Lily had seen him—usually being dragged to and from the confessional room—and he obviously wasn't happy.
It baffled her that he was often so openly distressed, yet nobody else seemed to have noticed anything amiss. Even Isabella, who claimed to know, in the deepest corners of her heart, that James would be the love of her life, future husband, and eventual father to her children, hadn't once mentioned the fact that he was often quite forlorn.

Maybe he was always so incandescently happy when he was alone with Isabella that she simply hadn't noticed. Company in general seemed to perk him up considerably.

Except for when that company was Helena's. Then he'd cling to Lily's hand in desperation, like a child begging to be saved from the monster under the bed.

Either way, it was patently clear that he needed someone to look out for him, but nobody was bothered, which begged the question: if Lily was the only one who'd noticed, didn't common decency obligate her to be the one to do it?

They were mates now. Sort of. Somewhat.

"I think I need a pen and paper," she said aloud, breaking the short silence that had settled over the room and prompting an odd look from Beatrice, who had finished her toes and moved on to her fingers.

"What?" said Bonnie sleepily.

"A pen and paper," Lily repeated, and turned around again. "Do you want me to tell them downstairs that you're sick so you can sleep in here? It's not like we're needed that badly until the group date tomorrow."

"That'd be lovely, ta," Bonnie said. "I think James is allowed to have that stuff, 'cause he said something about doodling in his room when he's bored."

"I knew that already, but I need a pen and paper from someone who isn't him," Lily clarified. Writing James a note in secret would be pretty bloody difficult if she were forced to ask him for the tools to do it on camera. She may have had the liberty of alone time with the girls when they were in their quarters, but he was the last person she'd realistically be able to wrangle away from a recording device.

"Text Peter and ask him," said Beatrice. "That usually wor—what's wrong with you?"

She had just caught sight of Lily's pointed, panicked stare.

"You've got a phone?" said Bonnie, her eyes flying open.

"Oh," said Beatrice, comprehension dawning. "Shit. I'm so sorry."

"No, but seriously, do you have a phone?" Bonnie pushed herself up on her elbows. "Like, on you, right now?"

Lily shared a look with Beatrice. Her insides had turned over. "No?"

"You're lying," said Bonnie pointedly. "Teacher, remember?"

"Okay, yes, I do have a phone," Lily admitted, and took her mobile out from beneath the towel. Bonnie's eyes widened greedily. "Please don't tell anyone, okay? I just...really need it for work."

"Aren't you a cashier?"
Beatrice laughed under her breath. "Told you that was a shit cover."

"I wasn't the one who bloody decided it, was I?" Lily fired at her, then winced at Bonnie. "So, um, certain parts of my application _may_ have been fabricated—"

"No shit. We've all been lying about something," said Bonnie, and pointed at Beatrice. "She clearly fancies Remus, and Wendy's only here because she wants to be famous, and Helena's lied a whole _bunch_ of times. She's still pretending that she doesn't hate bacon, just because James said it was his favorite food."

Lily frowned at that. "Why on earth would he care if she doesn't like bacon?"

"He wouldn't, he's not a dickhead, but that's the path she's chosen," said Bonnie. "What's your real job?"

"I'm a journalist," she said heavily.

"Oh," said Bonnie.

"She's writing an exposé on the show," put in Beatrice.

"Oh," Bonnie repeated, her eyes growing wider.

"My boss, who is a _prat_, by the way, applied on my behalf with the most offensively archaic bollocks you've ever heard—"

"I'm looking for a man who can hunt and gather," Beatrice recited, grinning. "Someone who can provide for me and our children."

"He's got a few connections in production, most specifically with a fact-checker who basically backed up his lies and approved me for Rita, and the gaffer on set—"

"Is that the bloke who bought your McDonald's?"

Lily nodded. "He smuggled in my phone, too."

"This is bonkers," said Bonnie quietly. "I mean, brilliant, obviously, and Rita bloody deserves it, and I'll keep it to myself—"

"Thank you!"

"—but bonkers."

"The article isn't going to paint any of you guys in a negative light, I promise," Lily hurriedly added. "Not even Helena. Its purpose is mostly to shine a light on the way we're all being treated here, and I've got a lot of notes already, but obviously I'd like to stay for as long as I can and get as much info as possible at every stage of the competition."

"Is that why you've suddenly started being nice to James?" said Bonnie curiously.

Lily blinked at her. "What do you mean?"

"You were sort of ignoring him before, weren't you?"

"Was I?"
Bonnie sat up fully on the bed, swinging her legs over the side. "According to Isabella, yeah. She's sort of worried about the two of you because of the photoshoot." She frowned. "And the fries. But if you're only doing it for the article—"

"No, it's not—"

"Lily fancies him," said Beatrice.

"Lily does not fancy him," Lily retorted. "Lily would like to get his point of view on things, but no." She shook her head at Bonnie. "I'm not doing it for the article, I'm being nice because I like him. As a person, I mean, not... you know."

"I mean, it doesn't matter to me if you do, either way," said Bonnie. "I signed up for the experience, not to get a boyfriend. He's nice, but it won't break my heart if he's not interested."

"Not like Isabella," said Lily softly.

"Exactly," Bonnie agreed, frowning. "He's obviously going to end up with her, anyway, so—"

"He won't," said Beatrice flatly, and pointed her bottle of nail polish at Lily. "Nothing really there, I've already told you."

"You said that for the cameras."

"No, I said it because it's true."

"Then where was the bullshit signal?"

"What bullshit signal?" said Bonnie.

"Lily and I have a code we use on camera to separate truth from lies when we're talking," Beatrice explained. "Come over here and I'll teach it to you."

Bonnie did as she was instructed, noting with a gleeful giggle that she now felt like a secret agent, so that was one potential problem rectified. She wasn't going to rat them out, Lily had another eye on the inside, and she and Beatrice would both need to be a little more careful in future. If another of the girls had to witness such a slip, Bonnie was the best possible person for the job. Any one of the rest of them—even sweet, lovely Isabella, if she was as worried about Lily as Bonnie claimed—might have been inclined to run to Rita and tell her the truth.

There would be three of them, now. Three out of eight, infiltrating the show, acting directly against Rita, quietly working to ensure that their cursed showrunner got the exact lampooning she deserved.

The thought gave Lily some satisfaction.

Tragically, the date with Isabella came to an end. Not before James made McGonagall almost smile about five more times, though. And, less happily, not before Isabella had been hurt by McGonagall’s dry and tough humor approximately five other times.

But it didn’t matter. They wouldn’t see McGonagall again. James raved about their date in his confessional and didn’t even feel guilty for telling the full truth.

On their way back to the cars, James pretended his shoe had come untied and fell back. Then he did their friendship whistle at Remus, who silently backed up to stand by James, but deliberately
faced away from him, staring up at the clouds.

He could be the sneakest of all of them, really.

"I’m pretending to study a bird," Remus said. "What’s on your mind?"

"Just wanted to say hi, really." James untied his shoelace knot. "Not used to being close to you guys but not really able to do anything together."

"I admit, this has been less of a bonding experience than I had hoped."

"You and Sirius seem to be bonding plenty over my misery."

"Admittedly true."

"Must be pretty dull for you, though, since it’s so obvious who I’m going to pick at the end."

Remus looked sideways, revealing his face in profile against a bright blue sky. "Well," he mused, "I suppose there is some truth to that."

"Some?"

"Several contestants certainly hold more appeal than others."

"You like Isabella, though, right?"

"She is sweet," Remus said thoughtfully. "I confess that as good-natured and attractive as she is, she wouldn’t be my choice. But it isn’t a show about that, is it?"

James waggled his eyebrows. "Yeah? Who would you go for, then?"

If James wasn’t mistaken, a bit of color appeared on Remus’s cheeks.

"I believe talking about the contestants off-camera is forbidden, James." Remus turned so his back was to James again. "Rita’s racing over. Best finish up with your shoe," he said, and strolled away.

In what was the tragic reality of James’s current situation, that was the only bit of genuine conversation he had for the rest of the day. Rita and the crew hovered around him the rest of the time. James ended up recounting the date in full to Algernon in their room, but Algernon had the audacity to fall asleep when James was only halfway through a loving description of how he’d had to "help demonstrate" a particular pull of the bowstring to Isabella by putting his arms around her.

"Oi," James scolded him. "Don’t think I won’t keep talking just because you’re pretending to sleep."

At least there was no cocktail party that night. While it meant no more Isabella time until the morning, it also gave James a chance to lay about in his pants and watch Bond movies on DVD with a fan pointed directly at his face.

He could have done with some more fries to really make the evening. He still had no clue how Lily had managed that. Audacious, really, and James didn’t want to know how Rita would respond to something so blatantly against the rules. They couldn’t air any of the footage of Lily bringing him the fries, not with that big gold logo on the carton.

It was a brilliant side benefit to having received delicious fries. Maybe he should start bringing up more brand names just to ruin scenes.
Then again, James only had so many arms, and no additional ones for Rita to bruise with her crushing grip.

That night he dreamed about his and Isabella’s eventual wedding. He had no recollection of any flowers or clothing or anything the next day, but he definitely remembered that at his dream wedding, there had been an endless supply of McDonald’s fries. Lily kept bringing him more and more cartons and setting them around his feet.

Waking up after that was a real let down. At least Algernon was cuddling against his side, and that was nearly as good.

Algernon’s mood soured, though, when he was told he wouldn’t be allowed on the group date. He should have counted himself lucky to miss out, but he did enjoy a bit of adventure, and he did seem awfully sweet on Lily.

"I’m sorry," James told him. "I’d try smuggling you in again but I don’t have a better plan than last time. And unless you’ve come up with a better method…"

Sad, Algernon did not.

It all made sense when they arrived at the group date location, though: the girls would take turns canoeing around a lake with James. Algernon didn’t fear water, but he distinctly did not care for being on boats of any kind, and had the habit of jumping overboard to make James rescue him as a form of revenge.

Today, though, it would have been a relief to escape a shared canoe with Helena Hodge. Algernon would have been a real help there.

At least she wasn’t first on the list. Instead James climbed into a canoe and learned Beatrice Booth would be joining him.

She strolled down the dock, flicking her hair over her shoulder, and stopped at the end of the pier.

James gestured toward his canoe with his free hand, holding the paddle aloft in the other. "Welcome to my kingdom," he announced. "It is small and it is made of aluminium, but it is mighty and will save us in case of unexpected flooding."

Beatrice let out an appreciative laugh, and lowered herself into the front of the canoe with an ease that suggested she'd done this kind of thing before. "How long did you spend practicing that in the mirror this morning?"

"Didn’t have time after I spent all those hours silently watching myself flex my muscles."

"If you can't love yourself without cause, who else will?" said Beatrice. "Hang on, don't push off yet, I have to blow my darling a kiss."

She made a loud, smooching noise and extended her hand towards the shore. Lily, who was sitting on a towel next to Bonnie Grogan, pretended to grab hold of her kiss and pressed it to her cheek.

James grinned. "Ready now?" he asked with a wave to Lily and Bonnie.

"I was born ready," Beatrice replied very seriously. "Or, similarly, I've had years of canoeing lessons. Go for it."

"What did they teach you after the first hour?"
"How to look good in a life vest, mostly."

"You must teach me your secrets." He used his paddle to push them away from the dock and out into the water. A flat, shallow boat with a camera on it stalked after them like a shark. Rita, the actual shark, perched on a tiny metal stool next to Bozo the unfortunately-named cameraman. "Not only of life vest fashion, but also how to fold a t-shirt faster. I’ve heard there’s a better way and I assume you know it."

"What makes you think I know how to fold t-shirts?" Beatrice said with a loud snort. "I just throw all of my clothes on the floor like a peasant. Lily is the one who does our laundry—you should ask her."

"My mistake—you seemed like the type to like shortcuts, too." He frowned at her. "You guys have to do your own laundry?"

"Well, we asked the elves to handle it, but they went on strike."

He pondered this as they glided through the water, their strokes largely in sync. "I always thought it would be good fun to be an elf. Not like a cleaning one, but one who worked at the North Pole. Very fulfilling work, that."

"Oh, yes, I've heard all about your mysterious conversations with Santa. How were your fries, by the way?"

"The best I’ve ever had," he said solemnly. "Truthfully, I’ve never had a more satisfying food experience. It was…religious."

"I hope you thanked her for them. She got properly yelled at by Rita afterwards."

Rita shouted at them now to change topics, but what was she going to do, throw a piece of camera equipment at his head?

James just smiled broadly at her. To Bea, he said breezily, "Of course I thanked her. They were such a delightful…" He quickly ran through his memory of the evening. He’d got the fries, and Lily had sassed Helena—repeatedly—and Sirius had come to fetch James... "I mean, I think I thanked her." He pulled up his paddle from the water and tightened his grip. "Shit, did I not thank her? This is a disaster!"

"I don't know," said Beatrice. "She didn't say anything about it, but if you didn't, I will have to knock you out of this canoe for doing my girl so dirty."

"If I didn’t, I would fully deserve to be knocked out of this canoe." He bit his lip. "Shit. I really don’t know if I did. There was a lot going on." He added by way of explanation, "Helena was there."

"I'm painfully aware of that. She ended up eating most of our nuggets. It was an epic tragedy."

"Stop talking about McDonald’s!" Rita called out.

"You let her eat your nuggets?" James asked, aghast. "I didn’t get any nuggets, and you gave some to her?"

"Firstly, you got fries, you brat," Beatrice reminded him, though she grinned as she said it. "Secondly, I’d rather eat my own head than share my food with Helena. It was Lily who shared them because she's an angel, and far too good for this show, and I am shocked and appalled that..."
she apparently hasn't been thanked for her kindness."

He nodded. "She is too good for this show. I thought about sending her off since she doesn’t deserve this but she wants to stay to be with you, so that’s that. And I will thank her! Again, possibly. Not sure. But double thanks never hurt."

After that Rita threatened to ram their boat, so they instead switched to making up nonsense songs. They couldn’t violate any copyright laws with actual songs, and they had to give them something to film.

The following canoe rides with Valerie and Wendy were not terribly memorable. His outing with Charlene involved her lamenting how slow and quiet canoes were in comparison with motorcycles, in such unnecessary and dreadful detail that James considered pretending to jump in the water to save a make-believe cat.

Next up was Helena bloody Hodge.

Fortunately, though, she quickly became Helena bloody Hodge quite literally. Two seconds after she almost tipped the canoe clumsily getting in, she knocked her paddle into her chin and broke the skin clean open.

James nearly cried with relief.

While the medics stitched up Helena’s face, with Rita making sure to capture much of it on camera like the creep she was, James took the opportunity to gaze out at the lake with Isabella. They admired the ducks, and the trees, and the for-once pleasant English weather.

A loud splash and a curse drew their attention to the pier, where Beatrice Booth was now knee-deep in the lake. Lily laughed from the pier, plainly the pusher.

James laughed, but cut it off when Isabella cooed, "Aw, poor Bea!"

She was so caring it was unbelievable.

He told her that and a slight flush filled her cheeks.

Because this seemed like the beginning of an interesting scenario, James watched as Beatrice made her way out of the water, sloughed off her sopping wet shoes, and stalked off to grab a towel from a nearby pile. Lily called out something in a taunting voice, then turned back to the water, a smug tilt to her head.

In the interesting twist James hoped for, Beatrice immediately darted over to James with a look of intense determination upon her face.

Isabella said, "Bea, are you—"

"Hey, Potter," Bea said, interrupting whatever sweet and wonderful thing Isabella had been about to say. "You know how I used my superior canoeing skills to save us from that rock that we agreed to pretend was a giant lake monster to spare your ego?"

Looking at Isabella, James said, "Don’t listen to her, dear. She’s delirious from the sun, and also my blinding good looks." To Beatrice, he added, "What’s spurred on this rambling?"

Beatrice hit him with the wet end of her towel. "You promised me a favor and I want to cash in."
"What sort of favor?" Isabella asked cautiously.

"I'm so glad you asked!" Beatrice sang. She pointed towards Lily, who was standing on the end of the pier, animatedly discussing something with Bonnie. "Isabella, darling, do you see that redheaded beauty over by the water?"

"Cut to it, Booth." James winked and wrapped an arm around Isabella's shoulders. "I have wooing to do here."

"Fine, Potter," Bea replied coldly, eyeing the two of them with…could it have been distaste? "Lily pushed me into the water. She impugned my honor. I need you to throw her into the lake."

He blinked at her. "Why don’t you do it? Surely those canoeing lessons gave you some wicked arm strength."

"I tried, but she's weirdly good at resisting. She just goes limp, and I am but a delicate butterfly, a slave to dance, AKA she's stronger than me and I need more muscle."

James looked down at his shoulder and back up at her. "Are you sure you’ve come to the right person for that?"

"Are you sure you want to wait for me to dream up a more unpleasant favor?"

"Point to Booth." He withdrew his arm from Isabella and instead took her hand. "It’s only for the sake of my own honor that I leave you now."

Isabella looked concerned. "James, I’m not so sure this is a good idea."

"I'm sure it's a better idea than what I might come up with after an hour or two to think," said Beatrice, then added, looking thoughtful, "How about I throw in a care package from my parents' bakery when we're all out of here?"

James spun toward her. "Deal." He glanced back at Isabella. "It'll be fine. It’s just water."

Isabella looked as though she might argue, but didn’t. "Come back soon," she said.

"Absolutely. Swiftest of favors, then an even speedier return."

"Brilliant," said Beatrice. "I'm going to go and distract Lily. You come up from behind."

She spun and skipped back over to her waiting friends with her towel streaming behind her, circling the girls when she reached them, so that her back was to the water and Lily's back was to him.

While Beatrice chattered with Lily, James made his move.

He stalked to the end of the dock, watching as Bea somehow tactfully dispatched Bonnie to the shore. Bonnie passed him as she hopped onto the sandy beach, grinned, and gave him a quick high five.

Bea made eye contact with James, and it was on.

He took a couple steps back in the sand, kicked off his sandals and ditched his shirt, and began running full tilt toward the girls. He really did have stick arms, which meant he’d need the added speed to make sure Lily ended up in the water. It would be shameful if he failed at pushing her in under any conditions, but especially in front of a bunch of other hot girls.
His feet pounded on the pier’s wooden slats, sending them clunking against the metal frame, while his arms pumped at his sides.

Lily turned around almost at once, while Bea took a large step sideways. Lily’s gorgeous eyes opened wide, her mouth dropped open, and two seconds later James made contact.

His outstretched hands collided with her shoulders, pushing her off-balance.

James had considered many factors in this approach. He had not, however, considered that she might grab onto his wrist.

Which she did.

She tipped, her torso leaning back over her legs, then arced backwards toward the lake. His momentum and her grip kept them together as they splashed into the water, Lily just below him.

She let go as they both flailed to orient themselves in the dark water.

At one point she kicked him in the shin, and he accidentally tugged a hand through her floating mermaid hair, but eventually they separated and broke toward the rays of sunlight filtering through the water.

James came up first, one hand pressing his glasses against his face. He coughed out a mouthful of lake water while Lily resurfaced next to him. She took one great gasp of air, her dark red hair plastered to her neck and shoulders, and let out a sound that could have shattered glass.

They tread water near enough that he could feel the water moving from her arms. They were also near enough that she could, and did, splash him soundly in the face.

"What the fuck, Potter?!" she cried, and splashed him a second time. "Have you lost your bloody mind?!"

On the dock, Beatrice and Bonnie were spluttering with laughter.

He shook the water out of his eyes. "Obviously I did not intend to personally end up in the water. That part was a mistake."

"Oh, I see," she said loudly, though with an amused tinge to her voice. "It was just the pushing me in part that went according to plan, yeah?"

"I’m so glad we cleared that up with minimal fuss."

"I got you fries out of the goodness of my heart," she reminded him, with another splash for good measure. "And in return you throw me into a body of water?"

He kept treading water to avoid further splashing from her. "Fries for which I thank you deeply. Possibly again, don’t remember. But I owed Beatrice Booth one favor, and one favor only, and this was what she requested. It was a matter of honor, you see."

"First of all, you didn't thank me," she said. "Secondly, if I come down with pneumonia, I'm personally holding you accountable, and third—"

She froze for a fraction of a moment, her eyes growing wide.

Then she let out petrified squeal, and propelled herself beneath the dock with alarming speed, wrapping one arm tight around a piling to keep herself afloat, as if she were afraid he might try to
drag her to the murky depths and finish her off.

"No," she muttered to herself, and squeezed her eyes shut. "No, no, no, no."

He swam a bit closer, peering at her. "You alright there?"

"Something slimy touched my leg," she said, quietly, more to herself than to him. "Something slimy touched—" She squealed again, and her could feel the water push towards him as she kicked her legs wildly beneath the surface. "It's a frog, it's a frog, I know it's a frog."

He gave a short laugh. "You know what they say—if it swims mysteriously in the water and you never hear or see it, it’s definitely a frog."

Lily's eyes snapped open and found his face. There was no mirth in the glare she gave him. "I'm terrified of frogs, you absolute bellend."

"You’re not afraid of Rita Skeeter, but you’re afraid of frogs?"

"I'm glad you're having such a good time," she said, looking truly distressed now. She couldn’t seem to keep her body still, twitching even when a floating leaf brushed against her arm. "Go on television, try to drown a girl, laugh at her phobias—some bloody bachelor you are."

"Shit. You are really worked up, aren’t you?" He nodded to the ladder a couple meters from her. "Don’t stay in frog territory on my account—climb up on the pier."

"I have to move through the frog territory to climb out."

"Right. No, I totally get that." His arms were starting to ache from treading water so soon after bouts of archery and canoeing in quick succession. "But also...would you rather stay in their house any longer? Because short of me drinking this fish-dung-infested lake in its entirety, there’s not much option for you here."

"How about you get to drinking it while I take a quiet moment to reflect on just how elaborate my revenge is going to be?" she suggested. "Arse."

"Name-calling is what I get for maintaining my honor with your new BFF?" He swam toward her. "Look, if I get you out of this lake, can we call it even?"

"What do you mean, 'call it even,' when I've been nothing but nice to—" She shuddered. "Whatever. Get me out. I just want to get out."

"Right." He arrived at the ladder and sank down, letting his feet settle on the bottom rung. "I will inspect the ladder for frogs. Then I will get you safely to the ladder and onto land. Where they may follow you since that’s kind of their home, too, when you think about it."

"That doesn't help, James!"

He ran a foot along each gross, algae-covered rung to ensure there were, in fact, no random frogs about.

"The ladder’s clear," he said in a deliberately low voice. "Getting the target to safety."

"Isabella's not here," Lily pointed out. "Stop pretending to be James Bond."

"Can’t turn it off," he replied in the same voice. "Going into clearance mode now."
Then he dove toward her, splashing his arms and legs about manically to churn the water and chase away any living being.

"Dare the frogs to swim near us now," he called through the spraying water. "Come on, swim for it!"

Lily simply stared at him like he was deeply complex mathematics. "Are you trying to drown yourself?"

He kept thrashing. "I'm scaring away the frogs! Now come on, I'm getting worn out!"

Lily struck out for the ladder, though not before throwing him a long look of deep, bewildered disdain. When she reached it, wrapping her hands around its slimy rungs, she clambered up and out like her life was in immediate danger should she linger for a moment longer, then spun around on the dock's edge to glower down at him.

He swam to the ladder and grabbed both rails, grinning up at her. "Got you out frog-free, didn’t I?"

The look she gave him was clear, despite the water drops on his glasses slightly blurring his vision—never in his life had a woman been less impressed by him.

"Handsome," she said blandly, "but stupid. Just like all the other bachelors of yore. And here I thought they broke the mold when they found you."

His grin dropped away. He planted his feet on a rung and hauled himself half out of the lake, water sluicing down his bare chest. "I'll remind you that this was never my stupid idea in the first place, Lily Evans. Your mate’s the one who wanted the frogs to take you to a watery grave."

For a moment, her eyes narrowed in anger.

Then, unexpectedly, she laughed, a short, compressed sound in the back of her throat.

"Oh, Beatrice, oh God," she said to herself, and laughed again, touching a hand to her forehead. "That's not why she—I've only just realized."

He climbed out the rest of the way and pulled off his glasses, wiping one hand over his face to get water away from his eyes. "If you're trying to insult me, I'm not stupid enough to ask what you've realized. I can go spend my time with people who want me around."

"In my defense, you didn't push other people into a lake. Give me a little bit of leeway to lose some of my composure."

He shoved his glasses back on. "You pushed Beatrice into the lake first. Did you think she'd just stand there and take it?"

Lily blinked at him, and dropped her hand to her side. Her face had turned pink.

"But Beatrice told me to push her in," she said. "She claimed to have such a low center of gravity that I couldn't do it. She even promised to do the laundry this week if she was wrong."

James blinked back at her, then frowned. "Then why would she..." He shook his head, sending a few drops out around him. "Seems like a waste of her favor to get revenge over such a minor embarrassment."

"Oh, it wasn't revenge," Lily explained, with a careless wave. "It was...nothing. Just a stupid
dream I had. Thinks she's funny, that's all. And I don't think you're stupid."
"You dreamed Beatrice would make me throw you in a lake?"
She looked at him as if she was seriously reconsidering the redaction of her claim that he was
stupid, then gave him a tight smile. "Sure. Let's go with that."
He glanced over his shoulder to see Beatrice looking quite smug, arms crossed as she stood next to
Bonnie on the shore.
"Odd duck, that one," he said. "Sorry I pushed you in—I'd have let my honor take the hit if I'd
known how much you hated frogs."
"It's fine, I'm sorry I called you handsome and stupid."
"You don't think I'm handsome? Well. The insults continue."
She coughed out a laugh. "Maybe I think you've got enough women telling you you're handsome
without needing to hear it from me too, yeah?"
"One more never hurts?" he said hopefully.
"Well, alright, if you're going to cry about it. You're kind of cute when the light hits you a certain
way," Lily tossed her head, lifting her nose towards the sunlight, "but I'm cuter than you."
He tilted his head back and laughed, his chest warm despite his post-dip chill. "No arguments from
me—oh shit." He froze, staring at the horrific trio of Rita, Bozo, and Helena Hodge rushing toward
him. "Rita at ten o'clock. Where's my shirt?" he asked, eyes scanning the shore.
"Exactly where you left it, unless Helena's using it as a bandage for her chin."
He grimaced and crossed his arms over his chest. "I feel unclean," he said. "I feel naked."
There was no hope of getting his shirt now, though. The trio had made it to the pier, the dock
shaking with their relentless footsteps.
James debated the merits of jumping back in the lake and making for London, where maybe he
could join a sailing crew under the name Elvendork Potter.
"What on earth happened here?" Rita demanded, as soon as she drew level them both, Bozo and
Helena panting in their wake. "Where are your microphones?"
"Some of the others wanted to swim, so we had to take them off," said Bozo timidly, pointing
further down the lake, where Wendy and Charlene were paddling. "The water—"
"Not now, Bozo!" Rita screeched.
"It's fine," said Lily soothingly, with a saccharine smile for the snarling blonde. "You didn't miss
anything good, I promise, unless you count all the sex we had in the water."
James felt all his blood rise to whichever surface was nearest. And caught on camera, too—lovely.
He had to admit to himself, though, that Lily's cheek was magnificent. A thing of great glory and
beauty. If only he could enjoy it in private and not with millions of households on a weekly basis,
interspersed with ads for dish soap and condoms.
Rita's jaw tightened as she surveyed Lily. "Go and get yourself dried off."

"Sure," said Lily happily, and bounced away on the balls of her feet, calling out at the top of her lungs as she did so. "Ten out of ten for stamina, honestly. Where on earth did you find him?"

James took a step back toward the edge of the dock. His heel hung slightly over the edge.

Rita narrowed her eyes at him. "I think it goes without saying that there will be a recounting of this adventure in the confessional later."

"I've got amnesia," James said, because hell if he was telling Rita about Lily's phobia. And, because he knew it would piss her off further, "Who are you again?"

He'd pay for it later, but it was absolutely worth it to see Lily wander away free while he drew some of the ire for himself. He watched her cackling as she chattered with Bea and Bonnie, her wet hair longer than normal down her back.

She was really something, that Lily Evans. Even if she was completely undone by frogs.

On the morning after the canoeing expedition, which never really got off the ground following Helena's unfortunate accident, Lily woke up with a cold.

Summer colds were, of course, the worst kind of cold, because Lily's insides were now as hot and uncomfortable as the surface of her skin in the oppressive July heat. Her stuffed-up nose glowed like Rudolph the reindeer's—a reference she was sure James would appreciate—her throat was sore and scratchy, and her head felt so heavy and full of gunk that holding it upright for more than a few minutes felt like nothing short of a tremendous achievement.

"I blame you," she told Beatrice for the fiftieth time that day. They reposed on one of the many stiff-backed couches in what had now become a most familiar room, waiting for the arrival of James, and for yet another cursed cocktail party to get underway. "And Rita, and James, and you, and James again, but more than anything else, you."

All Lily wanted to do was sleep, but instead she had poured herself into a dress, styled her hair, and was wearing makeup that Bonnie had thoughtfully applied for her, sensing her snotty-nosed exhaustion and general disinclination to continue moving her limbs. Lily hadn't even bothered asking Rita for permission to skip the party and sleep it off, because she knew what the answer would be, and she wanted to spare her ears the pain of being screeched at.

Unsurprisingly, she had been promised cold medicine by another producer when she'd asked for it that morning, but that conversation had taken place over twelve hours ago, and it had yet to make an appearance.

She couldn't even ask Peter to fetch her some, as he had explained in a text that he was now being closely monitored by Rita, and any further in-person contact with her might cost him his job.

Rita Skeeter grew only more poisonous with each passing day.

Perhaps Lily didn't have a cold at all. Perhaps she was simply allergic to Rita.

"It's really difficult to take you rancor seriously when you're literally snuggling me," Beatrice pointed out.

"You're an evil woman with a comfortable shoulder."
"I'm all comfort, me," said Beatrice, and bumped her cheek against the top of Lily's head. "Did you know that we're going to get a flat together after all of this is over?"

"Really?" said Remus, who was perched on the edge of coffee table, having wandered over for a chat. "That's wonderful, and it's good to hear that you're coming away from this experience with real friendships. Are you both based in London?"

Lily felt Beatrice nod. "Camden, baby."

"That's minutes away from me," said Remus.

"Lily and I literally live two tube stops from each other and take the same train to work, but we'd never met before."

"Never met," Lily seconded, with a sniff. "Can you believe it?"

"It seems almost criminal that you didn't," Remus solemnly agreed.

"And now we're locked up here," said Beatrice, and laughed. "There's some poetic justice for you."

Remus returned her laugh. "Surely it's not so bad that it feels like prison?"

"Oh, it certainly has its perks."

"Such as?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" said Beatrice coyly.

"Flirt," Lily quietly accused, and closed her eyes against the light in the room, which was made to be flattering on their figures and faces, but was no less of an assault on her senses in her current condition. "I can't believe I'm going to die from dirty lake water, as opposed to the very brutal garroting that Rita's been dreaming of since the day we met."

"I thought it was a slow immersion in boiling acid?" said Beatrice.

"Either way, a literal murder would be a really snazzy way to end the show," said Lily thoughtfully. She opened her eyes, and regarded Remus seriously. "What say you, host?"

"I mean," Remus began, smiling at her, "I'd really prefer to keep all the contestants alive—"

"It'd make for better telly than Mr. and Mrs. Vanilla and their drying-paint romance, though," Beatrice interjected, and pointed to the fireplace, where Isabella and Bonnie were sharing a laugh. "He better come to his senses and ditch her soon, I'm getting so bored of this—"

"God, Beatrice, you're the worst," said Lily under her breath, shutting her eyes once more.

"Want him for yourself, do you?" said Remus lightly, to which Beatrice made a noncommittal noise, her body shifting slightly beneath Lily's head. Her friend was clearly pointing at her. "Oh, I see."

"I'm not mad for thinking it, right?"

"Absolutely not. I'd had a similar thought myself."

"Finally, a man with some sense in this castle."
"Just because my eyes are closed, doesn't mean I don't know that you're talking about me," said Lily loudly, and let out a sniff, wiping her nose with the back of her hand, "but I'm far too ill to care about your crackpot theories today."

"What's got you ill, dear?" came a woman's voice.

Lily's eyes flew open to discover that Euphemia Potter was standing directly above her, looking far taller than she actually was, on account of Lily's prone position on the couch.

That, or the sky-scraping heels on her feet. Lily couldn't help but admire her balance.

"Hello," Lily said, and smiled politely at her. *Take better care of your son,* she did not add.

"Your darling boy pushed Lily into the lake," Beatrice explained, "in an act of unprecedented cruelty that was in no way prompted by me, and now she's got a cold, the poor thing."

Euphemia's brows knit together in concern. "He never told me that he pushed you."

"Didn't he?" said Remus.

"I just assumed that they'd jumped in together."

"I can assure you, I did no such thing," said Lily hoarsely, "on account of my fear of frogs, who tend to live near lakes, or so I am reliably informed."

"Are you telling me that my son *tackled* you into a dirty lake with no concern for your safety or health, and despite your deathly terror of frogs—"

"He didn’t know that when he pushed—"

"Nonetheless!" Euphemia cried, looking appalled. "That is not the proper way to woo a young lady, and I will *certainly* be having words with him about this."

Lily blinked up at her. "James isn't trying to woo me."

"Oh, James barely knows what he had for breakfast," said Euphemia. "Leave this with me, and I'll see to it that he makes amends at once."

She turned on her gravity-defying heels and marched to the bar, presumably to drink away the shame of having raised a child who would happily shove innocent women into lakes for the sake of a basket of muffins from Beatrice Booth's mum.

"What's she going to have him do?" said Lily, feeling disoriented. "Cure my cold with homeopathic aids?"

"Apologize on bended knee, knowing her," said Remus.

"Maybe she'll make him give me Algernon," said Lily hopefully. "Or some cold medicine."

"Or a get-better kiss," said Beatrice, with an evil grin.

Somehow, and from somewhere, Lily found the strength to elbow Beatrice soundly in the ribs at the very moment James made his entrance. Remus darted to the head of the room, and all the girls stood at attention, as if James was the bloody national anthem or something. Even Lily climbed to her feet, knowing all too well the punishment for failing to comply with this particular rule.
Rita could have given the most notorious of historical dictators a run for their money.

As soon as all of the usual formalities were done with, and James was promptly grabbed by his mother—the only woman alive who could monopolize his time without fearing an immediate interruption from a heavily stitched and bandaged Helena—Lily retreated outside, where the air was beginning to cool. She kicked off her shoes and collapsed into the loveseat by the pool.

Rita would eventually chide her for refusing to mingle, but Lily honestly didn't care. James had been right—she wasn't scared of the showrunner, and would happily take a one-on-one with her over an encounter with a frog, any day of the week.

As always, she was quickly found by Algernon, who jumped into her lap and settled happily against her chest. He had been banned from the common area for a couple of days after he boldly scratched Charlene and Helena, drawing blood from the latter. Euphemia had intervened on his behalf and had his freedom reinstated, much to Lily's relief.

"There you are, my sweet boy," she said softly, wrapping her arms tight around the plump, darling creature, who continued to delight her with his love whilst openly disdaining everyone else he encountered. "You'll keep me company for the night, yeah?"

Algernon's happy purrs indicated that he was perfectly content to do as she asked, and Lily let her eyes flutter shut once again.

Though she'd probably lie to Rita if she were asked about it later for the sake of peace and quiet, she was almost certainly dozing off when James arrived—or, more accurately, was shoved unceremoniously in her direction by his formidable mother—and interrupted the perfect moment of bliss that she had been sharing with his cat.

He immediately dropped to his knees in front of her, clasping his hands together in front of his chest. "Lily Whatever Your Middle Name Is Evans," he began in a dramatic voice. "I come to offer my sincerest apologies for the incident yesterday which I know we agreed never to speak of again."

What a way to be startled awake.

Lily had started to laugh almost as soon as he dropped to his knees.

While Euphemia observed her son's ridiculous apology near one of the cameras, Algernon fixed Lily with a pointed stare, looking up at her as if to say, see what I have to put up with?

Strange family, this lot.

"And how deeply sincere you are," she sighed when he had finished. "Would you like me to submit your performance for Emmy consideration? I hear they're the Oscars of television, and, well..." She extended a hand to the cameras around them. "I believe it's fitting."

Algernon stayed in her lap, but moved to perch further down on her knees and extend his head towards his owner, as if to indicate that James had his permission to pet him.

"I mean, I never say no to a trophy." He cocked his head at her while he pet Algernon’s neck. "Are you ill?"

"Oh, no," she said, and ruffled the fur on the cat's back, "this is the sexy voice I use when I'm performing in Central Perk."

He threw his head back and laughed, then got off his knees. "At least then there was one positive
side effect of the incident of which we shall not speak. Best of luck with your singing career. I think you and Bea will go far."

"I agree. Best of luck at the Emmys." She cocked her head to the side. "Though, having thought about it very deeply for the past five seconds, I think you overacted a bit. Best work on that."

A strange half-smile appeared on his face. "Might have to stick to my thrilling day job in the hair care industry, then." The smile lingered for a second, and then disappeared. "Seriously, though, are you all right? D’you need anything?"

"I asked them for cold medicine this morning and they said they'd get me some, but I'm still waiting. That's what happens when you talk back to the sea witch, I suppose."

He rubbed a hand over his forehead. "Poor, unfortunate souls," he sang under his breath. Then he dropped his hand and looked over his shoulder. "I'll go put my mum on it. She'll get it taken care of."

Lily followed the direction of his gaze. His mother was watching them still, with a wide smile stretched across her face. "Why is she grinning at us like that?"

He gave a wave of his hand and started turning toward Euphemia. "She has a deep and inexplicable love of reality television, so every day right now is her favorite day of all time. Better than the day I was born, she’s told me, and the day she first had sex with my father."

Lily shifted in her seat, and ignored her urge to ask if his father was that good in bed, and if so, if James took after him. That was the kind of thing he should have been bantering about with Isabella, difficult as it was to imagine Isabella joking around in that way.

Algernon moved closer to her stomach. "No wonder she looks so happy," she instead settled upon. "This must be the high-octane stuff she signed up for. Women with colds. Men with cats. A sad lack of paracetamol all round."

"It’ll break her heart, yeah, but she’ll definitely fix that last one." He smiled at her and Algernon. "Feel better, yeah?"

"I will, if only to witness Helena's next hilarious injury," she promised, and waved him away. "Go and enjoy your evening. I couldn't live with keeping you from the girl of your dreams—"

His mother laughed loudly in the background. "—or let you catch my cold," she finished, with a puzzled frown in Euphemia's direction. "Rita would infer things, as she often does."

His brown skin paled slightly. "Oh God. Yeah. Okay. Getting you those meds now." He waved goodbye, seemingly mostly to Algernon, and headed back to his mum.

"Are the whole family this dramatic?" she said quietly to Algernon, who purred his response. "I hope Isabella's ready to deal with that level of extra on a full-time basis."

Lily regretted that comment only slightly, five minutes later, when her longed-for cold medicine was deposited directly into her hands, with apologies and a bottle of water.

Later that night, Helena survived yet another rose ceremony, though this was unsurprising. She'd have the sympathy vote this week, having busted her own chin wide open with an oar. Crazy as she
was, it'd make James look pretty heartless if he were to kick her out after such a disaster, but it only boded ill for the future. With each passing day, and each subsequent ceremony, Helena grew more and more convinced that she and James were destined for one another, if only she could thwart the other women.

While Helena made it through, Charlene Stebbins and Valerie Turpin were eliminated.

Lily, oddly, was called up first, and thoroughly nudged by Beatrice when it happened.

And then there were six.

Five decent, sane, sensible women, and Helena Hodge.

"Single eliminations start next week!" Rita breezily announced, while a harried James was escorted to his room, or wherever they tended to stash him when he wasn't on camera. "It's getting serious now, gang!"

Then she crooked one finger at Lily, beckoning her to come over.

That seemed ominous, but Lily was so relieved to have finally taken some cold medicine that she looked upon the world with optimism anew, and besides, Rita was no frog. She could take her.

"Yes?" she said, approaching the demon and her ever-present clipboard.

"Change of plans for the next episode," said Rita brusquely, not looking at her. "We'd originally scheduled Beatrice for a one-on-one with James—"

"How did you know that Beatrice would be here after tonight?"

Rita fixed her with a pointed stare. "Don't play stupid with me, Evans. I know you orchestrated that little lake stunt for more camera time—"

"I absolutely did not."

"Nonetheless, your plan worked, and James has specifically requested your presence at the next one-on-one, so we've pushed Beatrice back by an episode. You'll be briefed on the activity and dress code in the morning."

The lie was so fusty, Lily could practically smell it permeating the room. Though it was clear that James enjoyed her company—as he should have, she was delightful when she wasn't gripped by the madness of frog-related terror—there was only one girl in the castle who he would ask to spend more time with, and it was not, nor would it ever be, Lily.

"He did not specifically request my presence."

"No," Rita admitted, with a smug quirk of her lips. "No, he did not, but that's what I've told Isabella."

She smiled slyly at something out of eyeshot, and Lily turned to see Isabella Marks, who was hand-in-hand with Bonnie, staring woefully back at her. Tears glistened in her soft, brown eyes.

Suddenly, the reason Lily had been called up for a rose before Isabella became abundantly clear.

She turned back around and glared at the showrunner in disgust. "You're a fucking succubus, Rita."

"And you're an odious little witch who needs to learn to watch her mouth," Rita retorted. "Now, go
to bed. We need you rested and beautiful for your upcoming date."

Lily could have slapped her, were she a less civilized woman, but getting arrested would have been a terrible way to end her time at the castle. She shouldered her anger and followed Beatrice up to their room.

She'd tell Isabella the truth of the matter in the morning—on camera, to spare her the public humiliation—if she could survive the night with this cold.

Even dosed up on Benylin, Lily felt utterly disgusting.

"Take your makeup off," Beatrice instructed, once they were in and she was struggling with her bra. "You and your skin will regret it if you don't."

Lily, meanwhile, had fallen down flat on her bed, still fully clothed.

"Can't. Dead. Tired," she mumbled. The fact that she was still zipped into her dress was unfortunate, because she did not have the energy to remove it. How she longed for an opportunity to spend all day in sweatpants. "It'll be fine. I'll do it tomorrow."

While Beatrice divested herself of her clothes and cosmetics, Lily reached awkwardly over her head and slipped her hand beneath the highly sophisticated hiding place that was her pillow. From there, she withdrew her phone and began her usual nightly routine—update her boss on the events of the day, text her mum to assure her that she was still alive, check her emails, remind her flatmate to water her plants—and noticed she had a voicemail from a London-based number she didn't recognize.

It was probably a sales pitch, or one of those people who called to offer compensation for fictitious car accidents in exchange for cash and souls, but Lily opened it up and hit play anyway.

"Hi, Lily," came a voice she didn't know; firm, assured, and with a strong Scottish accent. "My name is Mary Macdonald, and I'm one of the feature editors at the Quibbler—"

Lily sat up like a shot.

"—the reason I'm calling is because I'm looking at an application you sent in to us some time ago for a position which I believe we'd already filled at the time. As it happens, one of our feature writers is leaving at the end of September, and as you've expressed an interest in working for us—"

"Oh my God," Lily breathed.

"What?" said Beatrice.

"—I've been reading through your work at the Prophet," the voice continued, "and I love what you've been doing over there, but I think we'd able to offer you something a bit more varied and interesting in terms of content, so if you're interested, give me a call back on this number tomorrow—"

"Oh my God!"

"—as I'd love to meet up with you in the city next week and discuss it further." A pause. "Hopefully, I'll hear from you quite soon. Bye for now."

The voicemail came to an end, and Lily pulled her phone away from her ear to stare blankly at it.
"Are you alright, babe?" said Beatrice, who was sitting on her bed in her pajama shirt and pants, paused in the act of rubbing lotion into her impossibly long legs.

"Yeah," said Lily breathlessly. Her heart was beginning to pound. "Yeah, I think so?"

"Who was that calling?"

"It was a woman from the *Quibbler.*"

"The what?"

"You know, the website?" Lily stared without seeing at her phone's home screen. "I've applied to write there at least five times and they've never gotten back to me."

"And they just called you?"

She nodded. "They just called me."

Beatrice set the pot of lotion down on the floor. "Are you serious?"

"I don't know," said Lily. "I don't—wait."

On the off-chance that the voicemail was a setup, orchestrated by Rita, who had somehow discovered her real job—which was testament, really, to just how far she thought Rita was willing to go to hurt someone—Lily searched up the number on Google.

The first result she saw did away with her worries. It was no setup. No joke.

She'd been called by the real deal.

Her heart pounded even harder.

"It's the fucking *Quibbler!" she cried hoarsely, and jumped to her feet, excitement pumping through her veins, screw her cold. "The *Quibbler!* They actually publish interesting content, not bullshit clickbait, *and* they broke that story on the MPs taking cash to influence policy last year, and they're *feminist!* Most of their staff is made up of women!"

Beatrice lifted her arms into the air. "Seriously? That's amazing!"

"Oh my God, oh my God!"

She should have been keeping it down, she knew. Helena and Isabella's room was just next door, and the last thing she wanted was for the poor girl to hear her excitable croaking and assume she was expressing any delight about her rescheduled date with James. It was bad enough that Isabella had to bunk with a lunatic.

On the other hand, Lily had just had a call from her dream employer, and that mattered more than Isabella's feelings at that minute. This voicemail brought a potential opportunity to get away from the *Prophet,* and Rufus Scrimgeour, and a career spent fighting to be allowed to write weighty, on-topic pieces instead of pointless, celebrity-driven fluff.

This was exactly what she'd been working toward for years. This was the dream. This was *everything.*

"Should I call her back?" She stopped jumping to consult her phone again. "No, it's after midnight, I can't call her back or I'll look like a maniac, but she wants to *meet* with me, Bea!"
"Of course she does! She'd be mad not to!"

"I can't believe she wants to meet with me!" she cried, and jiggled about on the spot. "I can't believe—"

She stopped in her tracks, the smile slipping from her face as a terrible, terrible realization occurred to her.

"What's wrong?" said Beatrice.

"She wants to meet me next week," Lily clarified. "In London."

There was not a chance on earth, or any one of the many planets that swirled around the solar system, of Lily being allowed by Rita to take a day off from filming for the sake of a job interview, especially since the woman knew absolutely nothing about Lily's real career. Every member of production—even Peter, who had been told to give Lily her phone but had not been informed of why she needed it—was under the impression that she was a supermarket cashier.

Her friend's face fell. "Oh."

"Shit."

"Shit," Beatrice repeated, frowning up at her. "But you have to go."

"I know."

"You've already got enough for your article, and this is much more important than staying here—"

"I know."

"So what do you think you'll do? Quit?"

Lily sat down on her bed, her phone pressed to the duvet beneath the palm of her hand.

"I'm not sure if I can," she admitted. "Rufus will lose his mind."

She was free to quit whenever she liked, as Lucinda had, but that wasn't the agreement she'd made with her boss. He was such a snake that Lily knew he'd find a way to punish her for dropping out. She had firsthand knowledge of his adeptness at worming his way out of previously-struck deals; Rufus would argue that by choosing to leave the show, she was forfeiting her rights to finish the article, and subsequently, to any form of payment.

Lily couldn't afford for that to happen. She'd been promised a lot of money for this article, and she needed to stick to the agreed-upon terms if she wanted to pay her bills when this was all done.

Furthermore, she had been writing for the Prophet for five years and had little experience with any other newspaper. The Quibbler was a serious business, cream-of-the-crop site that had crawled its way to prominence through a thorny forest of clickbait sites and commanded real respect. She'd be able to tackle meaty subjects, and work from anywhere she liked, not beholden to the confines of an archaic, stuffy office in Lower Holloway.

All it would take to send this golden opportunity crashing to the ground in a fiery pit of carnage was one bad recommendation from Rufus, and he was just petty enough to write one. He had threatened to, once or twice before, when she refused to write some pieces she disagreed with on principle.
She couldn't quit the show, not even if she lied and said she'd been let go. Though the show wouldn't air until the winter—and Lily was planning to take a long vacation to Guam when it did—Rufus had too many eyes inside the castle; they'd tell him about it at once, and she'd be in even hotter water than she was already.

But she had to meet with Mary next week. She didn't know when she'd get a chance like this again.

Lily couldn't quit, and stealing back to London for an entire afternoon was out of the question. She could barely spend more than a few minutes in the toilet without someone coming to look for her.

This, of course, left her with only one option.

She had to get kicked off the show.
"I can't even *look* at her right now," said Rita, and shoved her clipboard directly into Sirius Black's chest. "You do it. I need a strong drink and a sedative."

Then she stormed out of the room, cursing, which was a first if ever Lily had witnessed one.

Lily had also never seen Rita leave the reins of her precious show in the hands of someone else, especially not one of the confessionalists, and especially not when Sirius—who was also in trouble, having been caught in his bedroom with Charlene Stebbins mere hours before James had booted her out—was her best available option. Rita knew no greater pleasure than barraging the girls with probing question after probing question, sucking gleefully on the end of her pen as they reluctantly spilled their feelings, as if its ink and their candor sustained her empusa powers.

Normally, Rita would not have missed a moment like this for all the world.

In truth, Lily had initially believed that Rita might be delighted about the morning's events—such *drama*, such prime fodder for the cameras—even if nobody else was. However, when they arrived back at the castle and a producer herded Lily into the small, brightly lit room where the confessionalists were filmed, she found Rita throwing a tantrum fit for a child who couldn't get her own way, and nobody would tell her why.

Now, Lily was sitting in front of a green screen, hot and burned and covered in bites, and Sirius was asking her to recap the disaster she had single-handedly orchestrated.

A disaster that, in her heart of hearts, she knew James had not deserved, even if the things she'd said were true. Her delivery had left a lot to be desired. Too much, in fact.

He was a nice guy. A good person. Lily liked being around him. He made her laugh.

She felt like an absolute arsehole.

"So, Lily Evans," said Sirius, looking far more amused than the situation should have allowed. "Tell us all about your date with James."

"Today," she slowly began, and paused. She'd had something suitably awful prepared, but that was before her entire plan had been completely bloody derailed. Now, she didn't know what to say. "Today, we went fishing."

"And how was that?"

She shrugged, and spread her hands out wide. "I don't know what to tell you. It was fishing. Who goes *fishing* on a date? Do you? Does *anyone*? Is there a single person on this earth who can hold up a wet, stinking trout and say, 'well, this was a romantic endeavor, darling,' and if so, are they *mad*?"

Perhaps she could talk about the horrors of fishing for the entire confessional.

"Sounds like you do know what to tell me."

She slanted a humorless smile at him. "How's Charlene doing?"

"They won't air that," said Sirius, grinning. "But she's great, thanks. Tell me about the argument."
Lily scratched a slowly-blistering mosquito bite on her bare arm. "Nothing to say about it."

"You had plenty to say during."

"Great. That means I don't need to repeat myself now," she snapped, and Sirius raised his eyebrows at her, and she let out a sigh. This wasn't his fault, either. James was his best mate, and by rights he probably should have been giving her more attitude than this. "I mean, okay, spending the morning on a bloody riverbank, getting scalded by the sun, mosquitos biting you all over… it doesn't set you up for the best mood, yeah? And it's not like James and I are close. You try being on a date with someone who clearly wants to be with someone else instead."

Lily had no idea why she was bringing that up. She didn't care that James was smitten with Isabella.

She didn't.

It seemed easy, though, to just carry on in that vein. There were no other pertinent thoughts springing to mind that she could realistically share.

"It's like, what's the point to any of this? We all know who he's going to end up with. I don't want to be some bloke's second choice, his back-up option, his in-case-this-doesn't-work-out person—"

"So," Sirius interrupted, "you want to be his first choice?"

"What?"

"You said you don't want to be his second choice," Sirius said. "Literally, just this minute. I assume that means you want to be the first."

"I don't—no," she said, shaking her head, and annoyed to find herself blushing hotly. "No, I don't ca—I just—I didn't want to go fishing."

Sirius stared at her for a moment.

A long moment.

"Right, fair enough," he said eventually, and looked down at the clipboard Rita had given him. "So, you were upset about the fishing, and you started a row—"

"I didn't start—"

"You started a row," he said, his voice growing louder, "because you don't like fishing, and you thought the date was pointless because of Isabella, and you've had some secret issues with James that you felt needed to be aired."

Sirius was a shit. A smug, presuming shit…who was giving her an out.

"I started a row," she tightly agreed, "because I don't like fishing, and I thought the date was pointless because of Isabella, and I've had some issues with James that I felt needed to be aired."

"Wonderful."

"Brilliant."

"And with all that in mind," said Sirius, looking at her with real interest now, "why do you think he wound up giving you a rose?"
Lily looked down at the flower in her hand, the first she'd received from James Potter that hadn't been immediately snatched away by production, because this was a one-on-one rose, and they needed to be part of confessionals. Lily had been singled out for this honor. Unlike the ceremony roses, this one was extra special.

It was a beautiful thing, with full, untainted crimson petals, and not a single thorn to be found on its slender stem, as fresh and real as the air she breathed.

She had assumed that they were fake, before she became part of all of this. How wrong she'd been.

"I don't know why he gave me a rose," she admitted, utterly perplexed. "I have absolutely no idea."

The night before...

"I can’t believe you snogged Charlene." James scowled as he paced in front of Sirius’s bed. Normally they’d never be alone in Sirius’s room, but with the crew and Rita obsessed with getting Charlene’s take on things, James had taken the chance to slip in unnoticed. "She’s always droning on about cow production in Wales or whatever."

Sirius arched a perfectly shaped eyebrow from where he sat on his bed, his back against the headboard and his legs stretched out in front of him, crossed at the ankle. "You mean the Norwegian leather industry?"

"That’s not the point!"

"What is the point, then?"

"The point is—you snogged a contestant! On the show you’re hosting!"

"And?"

"And—and you can’t do that!"

"You’ve had a dozen girls chasing you, and you don’t even like this one. Why do you care?"

James stopped mid-pace. "Because—because—I don’t know! Why would you want to do that with her?" he said, thrusting a pointing finger at the door.

Sirius stared at him. "She designs motorcycles," he said, in a tone that implied this was everything that would ever need explaining about it.

James frowned. "She does?"

"How can you not—never mind. You’ve bizarre Isabella blinders on. Your loss."

"She’s so bloody boring. Why would you want to be with her?"

This time both of Sirius’s eyebrows went up. "What makes you think we’re doing much talking at all?"

James blanched and walked out of the room.

It was the principle of the thing, he told himself. And his mum. And Algernon, repeatedly, until Algernon scratched at their bedroom door and James had to let him escape.
At least snogging the host was enough to boot Charlene from the show. James filmed a confessional about how he just didn’t get the sense Charlene was interested in him, so he wasn’t giving her a rose. If he was dead annoyed in the footage, well, the viewer would have to make up their own explanation for why.

The next morning he woke up without Algernon, who’d never returned once being let out. Hopefully he’d been taken in by Lily.

It turned out he’d have the opportunity to ask her in person on their one-on-one date that day. This was fortuitous. Having to go fishing alongside a river on a scalding hot day, however, was not.

"Fishing?" he said with a grimace, after Sirius had explained the date.

"It’s apparently one of Lily’s favorite pastimes," Sirius said breezily.

James turned to stare at Lily. "It is?"

Lily, who was standing with her arms folded tightly over her chest, pulled a face of disgust. The tip of her nose was slightly pink. "Do I look like Captain Ahab to you? No, it most certainly is not."

James kept staring.

Sirius tilted his head and gestured toward the camera, as well as an extremely interested Rita. "It says so on your application. Are you saying you lied?"

"My grandfather submitted the application as a surprise," said Lily. She sounded supremely bored. "Apparently, he filled out the form under the impression that I’d need to impress Don Draper. He wants me to 'find love' before he dies, if you've ever heard anything so ridiculous."

"I have heard something like that before!" James glanced over at his mum, who sat under an umbrella fitted with an overhanging mosquito net. Someone had brought her a camping chair and a fruity beverage with a tiny umbrella. Or she’d brought them herself—it was hard to know.

She lifted her drink at James and winked.

"Well," James said, clapping Lily on the arm, "it’s a bit of a relief to learn that your secret hobby isn’t taunting fish with imminent death." He paused. "Not that it matters, of course."

"No, it doesn't matter," she said. "It affects you in no way at all."

"Except that we’ve both been forced to come cause major injury and trauma to fish. But it’s not your fault, and I completely sympathize."

Lily exhaled through her nose and turned to Sirius, her arms still wrapped tight around her body. "Can we just get this over with, please?"

"Can we just not do this at all?" James asked hopefully, raising a hand to block out the sun. But a look toward Rita earned no response. She didn’t so much as glance at him. Instead she nodded at Sirius, who clapped his hands together.

"Let’s start the fun," he said with a smile.

Unlike archery, they had no instructor or guide today. Likely the production team had envisioned a somehow sexy date of Lily teaching him how to skewer a worm on a hook, or whatever. One of the crew members handed them poles, a tackle box, and a bucket full of noxious-smelling bait.
Lily had a pinched look on her face during the gear distribution, holding her pole out as far from her body as she possibly could, occasionally fishing a tissue gingerly from her pocket and dabbing at her nose. She was still sick, then. Poor thing.

In a weird replay of what had got her sick in the first place, they ventured out onto a short pier, only this time they would absolutely not end up in the water.

God, he didn’t want to end up in the water.

When they reached the end of the L-shaped pier, he set the bait bucket a decent distance from them to lessen the smell. Then he came back to Lily, who’d set down her pole and the tackle box. He heaved a sigh next to her and rested the bottom of his fishing pole on the pier.

"D’you know what to do if we somehow actually manage to get a fish?" he asked. "Because I freely admit I have no bloody clue."

Lily didn’t answer right away, but slapped her hand against her bare arm.

"Bloody mosquitos," she murmured, then looked up at him and shrugged. "Just throw it in the water. You're good at that."

He nearly flinched. Fair enough for her to be snippy, though. There were probably frogs around here, and she was stuck atop their aquatic home.

"Look," he said, "I’m not exactly pleased as punch to be fishing in this sweltering heat either, you know. I’d much rather be, well, anywhere else. Preferably somewhere with less wildlife." Hopefully she picked up that he meant he didn’t want her to be anywhere in the proximity of frogs.

"Then I'm sorry that they stuck you with me today, because I’m not good at bullshit and it’s not a skill that I particularly want to learn." She swatted at another lingering bug. "You'll just have to deal with honesty, for a change."

"I’m not asking you to bullshit. I’m saying we’re stuck here—or at least I am—and I’m glad it’s with you because I hate bullshit, too. Fishing is boring as hell, but at least I’m here with you and not handsy Helena Hodge."

Lily snorted. "I don't know what part I'm supposed to be more amused at, the fact that you blatantly wish I was Isabella or the fact that I've reached the dizzying heights of being better company than Helena." She touched a hand to her heart. "Please, slow down before I fall in love with you."

James’s mouth hung slightly open. Admittedly her cheek continued to dazzle and amaze with its quality, but she didn’t have to hurl it at him.

"Is this about the other day?" he demanded. "Because I apologized at least twice already."

"No, this is about me being painted as some sort of man-stealer and having to apologize to your girlfriend because I bought you fries and, I dunno, interacted with you once or twice," she shot back, then slapped angrily at her knee. "These fucking mosquitos, honestly!"

"Turns out your secret hobby is hypocrisy since that’s a crock of shit." He tossed his fishing pole against the wooden railing. It didn’t stay in place, instead clattering onto the pier. "Isabella would never make you apologize for giving me fries or anything like that. She’d never tell you that you had something between your teeth, much less ever call you a homewrecker."
"And your secret hobby is putting words in people's mouths," she retorted. "Did I say she made me do it? It was the Queen of Darkness"—she pointed in the direction of Rita behind them, who was watching what the nearby cameramen picked up on a portable screen—"who told Isabella lies about us, which she then believed. I apologized to her of my own bloody volition because I didn't want to make a spectacle of her on telly, but go ahead and make whatever assumptions you like." She turned away from him, staring mutinously across the river. "We've got all morning."

"Seriously?" He jerked a hand toward Rita. "You're pissed off about bloody Ursula over there? Well, welcome to the bloody club. We meet every second that I'm on this fucking show."

Rita shouted something in the background, but at this distance it was incomprehensible.

"Yeah," Lily said, with a sniff, "I noticed your deep and unending misery, as it happens."

His heart gave a strange little skip. He couldn't pay it any attention, though, not when he had to use his wits to keep up with Lily. "And you decided the best way to react is to start a row with me. How generous of you. Thanks for making things even worse."

"I'm sorry," she said, and turned her eyes back on his face. "Should I flatter you instead? Should I tell you that you're just like James Bond? I know it's patently untrue, but it certainly seems to make you happy."

Her mind was so bloody quick he felt like he was Algernon chasing after a toy being jerked around. Only in this case, bizarrely, the toy was intent on giving him small electric shocks.

"I might not be James Bond," he said, "but you're certainly out for blood yourself, Oddjob."

"First of all, Oddjob can throw a razor-edged bowler hat with all the accuracy required to kill a man and he's my favorite henchman, so that's not even an insult," she said, raising a finger in the air. "Second, you should take it as a compliment that I like you enough as a person to not compare you to a misogynistic playboy who cycles through women like moist towelettes." Lily turned her gaze back over the river again. "But you do you, mate."

As caught up as he was with the fact that Lily knew and loved Oddjob, James barely heard the second point. He heard enough, though.

He pushed both his hands through his hair, and then flung them out to the side. "You're mad at the sea witch—I get it. Who wouldn't be? But why the hell are you taking it out on me?"

"Because you frustrate me!" she said immediately, whipping back around. "I mean, I'm here because I wanted to appease my grandad, I knew coming in that I wasn't going to meet the love of my life, but why are you here? You don't need this show to meet women. You're a good-looking, charming person, and all they do is treat you like shit all day, and you don't seem to want to stand up for yourself, and I don't get it!"

"That's—" he began, but then stopped. She was so sharp and clever and angry, and she should have been angry—this show was absolutely bananas, and not in a good way—but with all the shit she was putting up with... "That's what you're angry about?"

"That, and my inevitable melanoma," she said nastily, as if she would hold him responsible for such a thing. "Sorry to shock you with this incredible secret, but I'm ginger, and we tend to burn when the fucking production team won't give us any fucking sunscreen." She waved at the people on shore. "Yeah, good luck using that footage."

Rita's voice was closer now, calling out for them to change topics.
"Hold up," James said, "let me get this straight. You're pissed off because you think I'm, what, too good for this show? Well, guess what? So are you! But you don't see me here judging or insulting you for being here despite all the crap they throw at us. Sometimes you've got to put up with bullshit to make the ones you love happy."

She propped her hands on her hips, knocking her fishing pole several inches to the side with her foot. It fell onto the pier, lying crosswise over James's.

"I am not judging you," she said with a scowl, "and if you're doing this to make someone else happy, that's great for you, but has that person stood up for you at all? Does that automatically mean you deserve to get dumped on all the time? You do realize that you are the show, right?"

She touched one hand to her chest. "I'm expendable in this insane fishbowl world we're living in, but you're not. They actually need you to keep this going."

James found it difficult to do much besides openly gape at her, his arms hanging helpless at his sides.

This was what had got her all hot and bothered? Besides the horrific heat that was turning her bug-bitten skin a bright shade of pink: the fact that Rita treated him like one of the insects attacking Lily?

Footsteps pounded along the pier, approaching them. They were not Rita's delicate heels, which was enough of a surprise to finally draw James's attention away from Lily.

Peter ran up to them, panting, and called out weakly, "Stop!"

Lily, however, did not seem ready to stop. In fact, her hand shot out and closed around James's.

"At our photoshoot," she said, with a slight waver in her voice, as if she was trying to make herself sound calmer than she was, "I watched her hit you in the head because you made a joke, and every time I talk to you, you're telling me how shit this whole thing is, and that's not okay." Her gaze darted away for a moment, but returned quickly back to his face. "Look, if I could make her get off your back and treat you like a human being, I would—I wish I could, I wish someone was looking out for you—but I've literally got no power here. You do. That's all I'm trying to say."

James would have killed for a witty response right then. He'd even have committed arson for even a mediocre one.

Sadly, all words that could be contained in a response had fled the premises like deer before a forest fire.

Instead he just kept staring at Lily Evans like a mute fool while Rita hurried toward them as quickly as she could in heels on a wooden dock.

Then, without forethought, James’s brain made his mouth say, "Someone is looking out for me." His eyes locked onto Lily’s. "You brought me fries."

Rita threw herself between them, breaking Lily’s grip on James. "This. Stops. Now."

She reached out and grabbed Lily's arm with her pincer-like fingers, but Lily wrenched her hand away immediately and traveled back several steps, moving out of her reach.

"Don't touch me, Rita," she said coldly, then pointed at James's chest. "Or him. And stop threatening to fire Peter just because he helped me buy some food. This is a reality TV show—you're not Christopher bloody Nolan."
Rita’s narrowed eyes and tense frame delicately suggested that she was prepared to launch at Lily any second. As the cameras were no doubt still rolling, though, she restrained herself to saying, "Back to the car with you."

"Fine. That's just fine," said Lily, and tossed her hair over her shoulder. She fixed Peter with an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry you had to witness this, Peter, and James—" Her eyes traveled back to meet his, and she let out a small sigh. "I'm just—sorry."

Then, with one last glower in Rita's direction, she pushed her way through the three of them and marched back along the pier.

Peter gave James a sheepish look.

Rather than say anything to him, James watched Lily hop onto the shore and walk with her head held high to the car park. It took a lot of will, he thought, for her not to so much as scratch the many bites on her arm along the way. Those mosquitoes had gorged themselves on her skin, apparently finding James as unappealing as haggis.

"She's not getting a rose," Rita announced. "She is an uncooperative troublemaker."

Without looking at Rita, James said evenly, "She stays."

"I have final say. It's in the contract."

"You can get rid of her, but any time anything interesting happens on this show, I will start cursing. I will mention every brand name I know. I will sing every line to the tune of Uptown Girl to make it absolutely unusable. You’ll have no show. Nothing."

"You'll violate the contract."

He regarded her coolly. "I won't be the one with half a series’ worth of expenses and nothing to air."

He breezed past her, strode along the pier, and stalked up to the crew member with the rose.

"Give me that," James said, and snatched it out of the bloke’s skinny hand. The man put up no fight at all, as well he shouldn't have.

With a filming Bozo in tow, James made directly for the car Lily had climbed into.

He knocked on the back-seat window. "Oi, Evans. Open up."

The window rolled down slowly to reveal a thoroughly pink-faced Lily, who lowered a bottle of water she had acquired and looked up at him curiously, a slight crinkle above her nose. "Yeah?"

He thrust the rose through the window, holding it in front of her face. "Will you accept this rose?"

She looked at it for a moment, then at him. The little crinkle deepened. "Really?"

"This isn't the sort of prank I'd enjoy, so yeah."

"Oh," she said quietly. She studied the flower for a moment, long enough that James’s heart skipped out of fear. But after a couple beats, she reached up and took the rose from his outstretched hand. "Thank you?"

"You're welcome," he said. "And have a nice night."
Without another word, he turned around and strolled away, shoving his hands in his shorts pockets, a faint smile forming on his face.

Guilt was a tricky bitch to live with.

It was also quite unfamiliar to Lily, who generally tried to do the right thing when she found herself faced with a moral dilemma. She just about managed it most of the time, and felt it was a point of pride.

Until today, it seemed, when she subjected an innocent person to an awful lambasting, all for the sake of advancing her own career.

She wasn't sure if that made her as bad as Rita, or worse, but she felt wretched about it, especially since she hadn't meant for things to turn out the way they did.

Her initial plan had simply been to annoy James so much that he refused to give her a rose, no doubt backed up by Rita, who was clearly desperate to throw Lily out the castle doors like she was DJ Jazzy Jeff. It wasn't ideal, but she'd assumed it would be easy enough to get on his nerves without venturing into hurtful territory. Regrettable, yes, because James was a nice person, but not morally bankrupt.

She hadn't meant to unleash on him.

She hadn't meant to add something as combustible as her actual feelings to the mix.

And so fast, too, like she couldn't wait to give him a piece of her mind.

Apparently, she felt more strongly about Rita's treatment of James than she had previously realized.

Following her confessional with Sirius, Lily sought out another producer and asked for permission to spend the rest of the day in her bedroom, recovering from her cold. It was a weak excuse, but the only one she had, and she was quite surprised to learn that Rita was only too happy to acquiesce to this arrangement. Of course, she added the condition that Lily take her rose with her to the swimming pool, where the other girls were lounging, so that the raw reactions of all could be caught on camera.

This shameless display, unfortunately, was customary for any recipient of a one-on-one rose.

It was uncomfortably hot outside, hotter even than it had been at the river, now that the sun had risen higher in the afternoon sky. Lily knew how she must have looked in her sweaty tank and shorts, her arms speckled with bites, and how she smelled, even though she hadn't touched the water. The slightly putrid scent of bait was clinging to her skin, while the girls all looked so pretty and fresh.

Walking up to them felt like an awkward, terrible, one-woman parade, only without the accompanying upbeat music, papier-mâché floats, or oversized balloons based on popular cartoon figures from her childhood.

And a crowd of only five people.

Normally, Lily liked parades. She especially liked watching them on telly, where she didn't have to stand out in the cold, but she had no desire to be part of this particular performance.
She slipped through the tall glass doors and padded across the concrete.

"You're back early," said Wendy, who was parked next to Isabella and Bonnie on a sun lounger, rubbing coconut oil into her exposed stomach. Her brown pigtails bobbed as she shifted in her seat to better see her. "How was it?"

Beside her, Isabella opened her eyes, her gaze falling immediately on the rose in Lily's hand.

This bloody rose.

This bloody rose that Lily had accepted like the biggest idiot in the world. She just might have gotten away with refusing to take it when details of their fight reached Scrimgeour's ears. She could have called it PMS, or something similar. Her boss was the kind of fool who bought into the theory that menstruating women were irrational beasts.

Lily was holding the rose with inexplicable delicacy, as if James had asked her to keep it safe, and it was of utmost importance that it stay perfect and whole, but there was no real reason for her to feel compelled to protect the thing that had essentially screwed her out of a job offer. She'd called Mary first thing that morning and arranged to meet her in Soho later in the week. Now she wouldn't be able to keep the appointment because James had done the exact opposite of what she'd expected, and saved her from potential elimination.

She'd throw the rose in the bin later.

Maybe.

"Date was cut short because I'm not feeling well," she replied, her eyes finding Beatrice's at once. Her friend was treading water in the middle of the pool, watching her concernedly. "I'm just here to say hello before I go to bed."

"Is it your cold?" said Bea.

"Yeah, I think so," she said, and scratched her arm with three fingers. Bullshit. Beatrice's face told her that she'd gotten the message. "Think I got a bit too much sun. They had us standing right out in it."

"You poor pet," said Bonnie, who was braiding Isabella’s hair. "Did you have a nice time before you felt poorly, at least?"

Lily shrugged her shoulders. "I guess. Maybe. I don't know, I'm just really tired."

They'd learn all about the fight soon enough—perhaps James would tell Isabella when he next saw her, looking for sympathy and affection—but Lily had no intention of spilling the beans on camera. She'd already done enough spilling in the confessional, though most of it was nonsense, and had obviously left Sirius with the cockamamie idea that she had feelings for his mate.

"You got a rose, though," said Wendy, smiling, "so he must have enjoyed himself."

"I don't know, maybe." She was starting to sound like a bloody parrot. Trying to reason out how their row had gotten so out of hand was difficult enough without puzzling over James's decision to keep her in the competition. "I'm going to head upstairs now."

"Wait a sec," said Beatrice, and swam gracefully to the edge of the pool, cutting through the water like the blade of a knife. She hauled herself out with her long, brown arms. "Just let me get dried off and I'll follow you up. They already took my microphone off so I could get in the water."
"Sure," Lily agreed. "I have to go and get mine taken off, so I'll see you upstairs."

She felt Isabella's mournful gaze on her back as she turned to leave.

Isabella was probably hoping that Lily would sit her down, for the second time that day, and gently explain that she had nothing to worry about.

If she was, she had a major disappointment coming her way.

Isabella had done a truly excellent job of preparing Lily for her role as Irritated Girl that morning. After listening to a profuse and unnecessary apology, and being assured that there was nothing romantic brewing between Lily and James, Isabella had sniffed, nodded, and could not understand why Rita would lie about it. Then she’d explained that she "struggling" because her time with James was rare and Lily was "so beautiful."

As if Isabella wasn't beautiful herself.

As if James was the type who could have his head turned by a pretty face and nothing more. Lily didn't know him like Isabella did but she would have been willing to bet that he was made of stronger stuff than that. She would have been offended, if she were him.

Isabella was kind and gentle and Lily liked her very much, but the whole exchange had been annoying beyond belief. Lily had been forced to bite her tongue rather than ask Isabella why she felt the need to fall to pieces over a man, particularly when she had walked into the competition knowing that she wasn't the only girl with designs on the bloke they were there to seduce.

This wasn't a real-world situation, Isabella wasn't owed any loyalty, and Lily was the only girl in the house who hadn't tried to flirt with James in any way. If she had, he would have known all about it. She was bloody good at flirting. Some would have called her a proficient.

If Isabella toughened up, then she wouldn't be brought to tears because other girls might fancy the boy she liked.

Lily didn't understand why she and James were so tight in the first place.

It was unkind of her to think it, but no less true.

Isabella was sweet, sure, but she was sensitive, and not particularly outgoing, whereas James...was a lot of different things. A lot of character. A lot of theatrics. He was articulate and funny and blindingly ridiculous, and didn't seem like the type of man who would meld particularly well with someone as sensitive as Isabella in the long run. He'd likely wind up feeling bored, and she overshadowed.

Really, given what Lily had observed of James Potter, it seemed obvious to her that what he really needed was to be with a woman who knew how and when to give him a kick up the arse.

A metaphorical kick, not a real one.

Isabella Marks was plainly not that woman.

But then, that wasn't any of Lily's business.

Once she had been stripped of all recording equipment and warned by producers to let them know if she intended to venture back downstairs, Lily made the arduous climb to the top floor, changed into her lightest pajamas and waited on her bed for Beatrice to follow her up.
Her friend appeared shortly, bringing with her a decorative glass vase that Lily recognized from the
dining room. She had already filled it halfway-up with water.

"Thought you might want this for your rose," she said, and set the vase down on the vanity.

"Were you allowed to take it?"

"Nope."

"So, you stole a vase on camera?"

"No, I borrowed a vase on camera. What are they going to do, have me arrested for moving it to
another room?" Beatrice countered, and held her hand out for the rose, which lay next to Lily on
her duvet. "Give it here."

"I ought to stomp on it," said Lily darkly, but handed it over anyway.

Beatrice popped it into the vase and surveyed it in silence for a moment.

Stupid, mystifying rose.

"Pretty," she concluded, then turned to Lily with one hand resting on her hip. "What happened to
goading him into giving you the boot?"

"Oh, it all went super well," said Lily, "except it got way too real, and I'm a bad person now, and
he followed me to the car and shoved a rose through the window." She gave Beatrice a thumbs-up.
"Otherwise, I'd say it was a perfectly executed scheme."

"Wicked," said Beatrice, taking it all on the chin. She sat down on the edge of Lily's bed. "Start at
the beginning and leave nothing out."

While Beatrice proved her mettle as a friend and future flatmate by hanging on to her words with
rapt attention, Lily ran through every detail of the date that she could clearly remember through the
smokescreen of confusion and shame, including the weird confessional with Sirius, those bastard
mosquitos, and the fact that she now felt as if she'd kicked an injured puppy in the head.

God only knew what James thought of her—that she was a lunatic, no doubt—or why he'd chosen
to let her stay. Her best and only guess was that Rita had insisted upon it for the sake of drama, but
that didn't make any sense. Most of their argument would be completely unusable on account of
how much they'd bashed the show, and if Rita wanted some insanity for the cameras, she had the
increasingly terrifying Helena Hodge at her disposal.

"Maybe he's dying?" Beatrice suggested, after Lily had finished recounting the date and declared
herself bewildered by James's subsequent actions. "Dying tragically, yet handsomely, and he
wanted to give you one last rose because…"

"Because what?"

"No idea. You're the writer. I was counting on you to think of something."

"You'd think his last port of call, prior to death, would be to give me a rose through the car
window?"

"I think the prospect of his imminent death would force him to wake up and realize that the two of
you are endgame."
"If you don't mind, I'm going to shelve the death theory on account of neither of us being a character in a romance novel," Lily said, slumping backwards against the wall. "Maybe it's like a punishment, or something. Like, he knows I hate Rita, and that she hates me..."

"Do you really think he'd keep you in to be cruel?"

"No," Lily sighed. "I know he wouldn't, but I really can't think of anything else at this point."

Beatrice made a thoughtful noise in the back of her throat and drew her feet onto the bed, hugging her knees to her chest, while Lily closed her eyes and focused on the slightly warm breeze that their ever-whirring fan was wafting towards her face.

She'd only been up for a matter of hours, but already she was tired.

Not that she'd have much luck sleeping if she tried now. She still had to call Mary and explain why she would be missing their meeting, then compose some sort of apology for James.

For the first time, she wished for a cocktail party. She could have used a drink.

"I've got an idea," Beatrice piped up, after a few minutes of silence, during which time Lily had started to count her bites for want of something better to do. "What if he let you stay because he appreciates what you said?"

Lily paused in the act of examining her inner thigh to frown at her. "What?"

"Well, okay, his mother's pretty hardy, isn't she? I mean, she made him apologize to you on his knees."

"She's hardier than most, I think."

"Well, there you go, he probably responds well to strong-willed women who tell him what's what."

Lily felt half-tempted to use Isabella as a counter-argument, but let that thought go. It was unkind. And true. But mostly unkind.

"There's a difference," she said slowly, "between tough love for the sake of progress, and flat-out insulting somebody."

"Right, because it's so insulting when a pretty girl says you're hot and charming."

"I also accused him of not being able to stand up for himself."

"Well, he wasn't standing up for himself," Beatrice pointed out, "and maybe he needed to hear that."

He had needed to hear it, Lily reflected. That part, at least, was true.

Shame it didn't make her feel any better.

James had been silent the whole car ride back to the castle. He’d taken the front seat, where Rita normally sat, and she hadn’t said so much as a word about it.

Rita’s presence didn’t normally shut up him and his mum. But he had a lot to think through.

Lily Evans.
Lily bloody Evans.

Lily bitten Evans, really.

He tapped his fingers along the car door beneath the window, watching the fields pass by.

She was just so...different.

In so many ways. In so many surprising ways.

She wanted better for him. But she’d just met him.

Of course, he’d wanted better for her, too. If she hadn’t said the word, he’d have kicked her off the show to get back to her own life and away from this alcohol-infused, camera-ridden hell.

James was always pushing Peter to do more. And Sirius. Not so much Remus, who actually needed to do less, given his heart condition. James was always wanting all of them to be happier and achieve more and generally live their best lives. Because he cared about them and he loved them and he saw where they fell short. He tried to help them. They usually did the same for him, current show misery aside, and even that wasn’t entirely their doing; the show basically banned them from helping him too much.

They all knew him terribly well—possibly too well, at times—and yet none of them had asked if he was all right. If they could do anything, within the show’s limitations, to help him out.

Why had Lily seen what they couldn’t?

He nearly laughed to himself. The answer, of course, was that they were used to him whinging. He loved a good whinge. He complained when his favorite cafe was out of raspberry white chocolate scones, and when Algernon didn’t bring him sandwiches, and when anyone beat Arsenal.

He’d boy-who-cried-wolf’d himself.

But even that didn’t fully explain why Lily had seen it, when none of the other girls had said anything.

The other reason, inevitably, was that...Lily was looking. Looking at him. Really seeing him, not just pursuing a connection to get another rose. She hadn’t even been interested in talking to him at all at first—just in Algernon—so she wasn’t saying any of what she’d said to stay on the show. To make him think she was deeply in love with him, despite knowing him less than two weeks. If she had, she’d have couched her concerns in soft, loving terms—not by picking a fight and insulting him while suffering through a mosquito swarm.

But if she had done it that way, would he have listened? Or would it have seemed like a ploy worthy of Helena Hodge?

A knuckle tapped on the window, starting James out of his thoughts.

He looked up to see his mum standing outside the car. They’d made it to the castle, apparently, and everyone but James had both noticed and exited the vehicle in a timely fashion.

"Come on," she said, her voice muffled by the glass. "We need to have a chat."

Rita remained cowed, and didn’t bat an eye when Euphemia informed her she was taking James to tea in one of the salons, just the two of them. She even directed Rita to send tea up to them from
the kitchen, and Rita only nodded tightly.

Euphemia led him through the castle, past miserable-looking portraits of the rich arseholes who’d owned this place throughout history, and opened the door to a room he hadn’t been in before. This one, much like the rest of the castle, seemed to have been decorated two centuries ago and never updated since. It was all uncomfortable furniture and dark wood and depressing paintings of grim-faced families.

As soon as his mum had closed the door, she turned around and demanded coolly, "She hit you?"

Oh. Oh. This was a follow-up he had not anticipated.

He shrugged one shoulder, turning halfway away from her. "Small smack upside the head. It didn't even really hurt."

"She and I will be exchanging words. Or rather, I will be taking my words and shoving them into her mouth and down her throat until she fully digests them."

"No," he said firmly. "Don't. I'm going to talk to her." After a moment, he added, "With less violence, though."

"This is inexcusable."

"Whatever," he said, eyeing the door behind her. What he really needed was some time to talk things through with Algernon. "I won't let it happen again."

"James."

He risked a glance at her, and damn it, this was exactly what he’d been trying to avoid: that unhappy tilt to her mouth, and the way she had slumped into a chair.

"Mum—"

"No. James." She pushed a few stray hairs off her wrinkled forehead. "I owe you an apology."

"You really don't—"

"I do. In all the excitement of a dream come true, I've been neglecting you."

"I'm a grown man," James pointed out. "I even know how to clean unwieldy stains on cooking pots now. Remus gave me a certificate of adulthood over it."

"But you're still my son and I'm responsible for making sure you're well. And you haven't been."

His heart wrenched, torn between the apology he hadn't known he'd wanted, and the agony of seeing his mum in pain.

"It hasn't been that bad—"

She lifted a white eyebrow. "Hasn't it?"

"I mean—all right, yes, it has. Obviously. But—"

"But nothing. I knew you wouldn't love being on this show, but I thought it would be alright. And I thought—hoped—that maybe you would find the right girl."
"And I have, so."

She beckoned him closer and took his hand. "You're putting up with a lot just being here," she told him. "You don't have to put up with being mistreated."

"No, I—I get that now."

"Lily Evans is the cleverest girl I have ever known—"

"Besides yourself, you mean—"

"Obviously—that's a given. She read you better than I could, and she was spot on today. Love is a two-way street, dear, and I'm afraid I've been forcing you down a one-way since I asked you to come on the show."

"I aced my driver's exam," James supplied.

"That's not remotely true, and stop making excuses for me. I'm your mum but I'm also human, so I'm allowed to make mistakes and then apologize. So this is me, apologizing, for making you so unhappy."

James's face felt like it was on fire. His mum had apologized for many things in his life, including that time he had walked in on a very kinky sex scene between her and his dad, but rarely as openly and honestly as this.

With his free hand, he meekly patted hers, which were still clasped around one of his. "There, there?" he tried because even though this was what he'd wanted, this was a lot and kind of embarrassing and it needed to be over now.

"The traditional response is I forgive you." She hesitated. "If you do, at least."

"Yeah," he said quickly, looking away toward the window. "Now can I have my hand back?"

"Only if you promise to stay for tea, even though I know you're desperate to go tell Algernon all about today."

James sighed, and wiggled his hand free. "Yes, Mum, I promise."

"There's a dear. We need to keep you fed and well cared for, or the girl of your dreams will lose interest."

"I can't imagine Isabella doing that over some minor fatigue."

Someone knocked on the door.

"That's the tea, then," Euphemia said airily.

While she held the door for the staff person bearing a silver tray with tea and scones, James had a sudden thought.

"Mum," he said, placing a hand on her arm. "How quickly can you get Lily some aloe and mosquito bite cream?"

Euphemia’s only response was to beam.
Calling Mary Macdonald back to cancel the meeting proved a less desolate experience than Lily had expected.

Her potential future editor bellowed with laughter down the phone.

"They made you do the fucking Bachelor?!” she practically screamed, before letting another whopper of a laugh reverberate down the line. "That's amazing! Fucking amazing. When's it airing so I can set it to record?"

Lily threw a look at Beatrice. She had been expecting some amusement when she confessed the truth behind her latest work-in-progress, but Mary had seemed smartly professional during their previous conversation. Now she was swearing like a sailor and cackling fit to kill.

"In the winter, I think?” Lily tentatively offered. "But disregarding all of that, I just need you to know that when I initially made the appointment I was certain that I'd get kicked off in time for—"

"Why were you certain?” Mary interrupted.

"Er..." She looked to Beatrice again for help, but her friend only shrugged. "I had a date with the bachelor scheduled, and I sort of...picked a fight with him during so he'd kick me out."

Mary snorted. "That was ballsy of you."

"Thanks?"

"What'd he do when you started this fight?"

"Got mad," said Lily quietly. "Argued back. Randomly gave me a rose afterwards."

Another trumpet-blast of laughter in her ear. "This is the best thing I've heard all day. Is he fit?"

"I mean…" The unbidden image of a certain crooked grin of his popped into her head. "Yes?"

"Then you better get yourself some, if only for my continued amusement," Mary said. "Listen, Meadowes isn’t leaving for another eight weeks and I'm really keen to meet with you before I have to advertise for the position. Assuming you do go all the way with this thing, will you be out in plenty of time for us to catch up for an interview?"

"Oh, God, absolutely. Yes." Lily nodded frantically at Beatrice and her friend began to cheer silently, throwing herself backwards on her bed and kicking her legs in the air. "A few more weeks at most."

"Right. Fab. As you were, then. And send me your article when it's done. I'm dying to read it."

That was one problem solved.

Owing mostly to her relief at having not screwed her shot at the job of her dreams, Lily slept a lot better that night than she had originally expected, though the mosquito cream and aloe vera gel that she'd been given also improved her situation. Euphemia Potter had brought them to the room in person, alongside a box of fancy macarons, countless observations on Lily's wit, beauty, and intelligence, and a dinner invitation to her home in Belgravia after the competition ended.

It had been a strange visit, and Lily—still a little miffed that she was the only one who had noticed how awful things had been for James—had felt as if she ought to have been less receptive to Euphemia's charms. It was difficult, though, to harden her heart against a person so determined to
impress upon Lily that she was a singular young woman fit for the gleaming marble floors and
glorious sunbursts of a tropical palace.

It was all a little over-the-top, but a compliment was a compliment.

Besides, the macarons were delicious.

If only her son were as willing to forgive as his mother, after what Lily had made him endure.

Though word tended to get around in such pressurized containers as the one they were all living in,
miraculously, the sun dipped and rose without incident. Lily woke the next morning to discover
that none of the other girls had discovered the truth of what happened between her and James
during their date. They'd all bought her story about illness without question, and Bonnie had even
overheard Wendy suggesting that James was deeply kind to have presented Lily with a rose simply
because she was feeling unwell.

Unless James seriously believed Lily's mind to be addled, it was highly unlikely that Wendy had
hit on a single iota of truth.

Over breakfast, she tried her best to worm her way out of the group date—apologizing to him in
front of the rest of the girls was not how she wanted to go about it—but Rita had regained some of
her snappishness, and staunchly insisted that she take part.

Lily almost skipped out anyway, intending to blame her dwindling cold symptoms, but then the
girls were told that the day's activity was a professional dance class. Beatrice was immediately
catapulted into the seventh heaven of delight, suffused with an intense joy which she claimed could
be marred by only one thing: the untimely absence of her little red hen.

"Just be cool about it," Bea instructed from the floor, her legs stretched into an elegant split. All six
women had gathered in the castle ballroom in their trainers and leggings—or in Helena's case, their
gold sequined jumpsuits. "Cool and casual. You know how to dance, right?"

"Um," said Lily, wondering what Beatrice, who had been taking ballet lessons since she could
walk, would consider to be an acceptable level of ability. "I can moonwalk pretty well?"

"Fuck off, that's amazing!"

"Language!" Rita cried, from the head of the room, where she was conversing with their instructor,
a short but oddly muscular man in a tight white t-shirt. "Remember, the cameras are rolling!"

Lily took a quick glance at Peter in the corner, and he sent a happy wave her way. His latest text
had confirmed that Euphemia made Rita apologize for her repeated threats to sack him.

At least someone's lot had been improved by yesterday's outburst.

"I feel sick," said Lily quietly.

"With cold?"

"No, with anxiety," she clarified, her eyes fixed on the door through which James was due to
appear. Her stomach was churning like she'd just been through her fourth consecutive ride on a
rickety wooden roller coaster. He was going to walk in at any minute, mad at her, probably, and
she had no idea how to take it from there. "Like, terrified sick. This-is-the-worst sick."

"At least it's not pregnancy sick," said Beatrice.
"I don’t think I’d still be here if I was pregnancy sick."

"Are you kidding?" Beatrice scoffed, and hopped to her feet with the sprightliness of a live wire. "Rita would try to pass the kid off as James’s and force you to reenact the conception."

"She’d probably try to film the birth."

"Imagine trying to push out a kid with Bozo pointing his camera at your business."

Lily’s laughter, which exploded in a peal that made everyone around her jump, was cut abruptly and tragically short by the arrival of James and Remus, who could not have picked a less suitable time to walk into the room.

Her delicate, queasy stomach flipped right over.

His eyes found hers at once.

He stared at her, and she stared back, and they kept on staring, on and on through Remus’s introduction, and their dance teacher’s monologue about "finding their passion" and "living the beat," until finally, Beatrice poked her firmly in the side and Lily realized, to her great shame, that all the other girls were watching her with undisguised interest.

They must have looked like a pair of deer caught in the most dazzling of headlights.

So much for playing it cool.

Lily had already known that James Potter was not subtle—five minutes spent in his company would lead any vaguely observant person to the same conclusion—but she had assumed she could do a better job of keeping it all under wraps.

The girls probably thought that she was in love with him. The rumours this would spur would likely be interesting.

She blamed James entirely for this. He should have had the decency to catch her at a solemn, subdued moment, not cracking up at a joke that inadvertently involved their fictional baby.

His fault. Not hers.

Their instructor called out for the first girl to come forward. Luckily, Wendy's name sat atop Rita's list. While she bounced up to begin her lesson, Lily sat on the floor next to Beatrice and stared resolutely down at her feet, letting her friend mutter comments and criticisms in her ear without really catching much of what was happening. Apparently, Wendy wouldn’t know proper form if it kicked her in the tits, and James was about as graceful a dancer as a flailing tube man outside a car dealership.

It didn’t seem to matter to Bea that all of her jibes were being picked up by a microphone.

Lily wasn’t particularly interested in any of the muttered asides—there was a deeply interesting floor to consider—but Remus, who had pulled up a spot next to Beatrice, was chuckling appreciatively at her many comments. She didn’t have to worry that she was denying her friend an audience.

After Wendy, however, came an all-too-quick downfall. Helena was partnered with James next, and quickly called a halt to the proceedings when she started to complain that she wasn’t wearing the right shoes, and therefore her feet were hurting. Rita agreed to let her run to her room and select
some appropriate footwear, and while she did so, James was allowed a couple of minutes to take a breather.

Lily assumed that he would sit next to Isabella, who had taken a spot on a rug some way away.

She didn’t notice him heading in her direction until he slid down to the floor beside her.

"Did you get the mosquito cream and the aloe?" he asked.

She nodded without looking at him, her heart thumping stupidly loudly, as if they were meeting at adjacent tables in a bar to conduct a secret drug deal. "Your mum brought them to my room last night."

"Good," he said. Then he plucked at a loose thread on his trousers, but it didn't come out. He ended up flicking his finger at it over and over.

*She* ended up watching its progress for far too long.

After a while, he asked, "And how's your cold?"

"Getting slowly better," she said. "And you? How are you doing?"

She wondered if all secret drug deals were this awkward and laced with regret. Probably. They were drug deals.

He stopped playing with the thread, and instead just held it taut between two fingers. "I'm...improved." She risked a glance at him, just as he gave her a sidelong look. "Thanks to you."

That was not what she had expected to hear.

Her heart was thudding still, but for an entirely new reason.

Lily swallowed air before she spoke again. Her mouth felt a little dry. "Really?"

He dropped the thread and rested his elbows on his propped up knees, letting his hands dangle down in between. "Yeah. It—well. Suffice it to say I had some, er, *interesting* conversations with a certain undersea hazard. And, weirdly enough, my mum."

Her thumping heart skittered about for a moment, unsure of what to do.

The last thing Lily had anticipated was for James to feel as if her inelegant tirade had brought about any kind of positive change for him. Even if it had, she had been so unkind to him that he was under no obligation to thank or even inform her. He would have been perfectly justified in keeping that to himself.

The fact that he hadn't made her feel...really bloody happy actually.

What it *didn't* do was excuse her behavior.

"Well, that's—okay. Good, I guess?" She let out a small huff of air. "I mean, I'm really happy to hear that, even though it kind of shits on the groveling apology I had planned."

"You can still proceed with that, if you like. But it's not—" He paused and made a thoughtful noise. "I think I understand why you did it that way. Or I can at least kind of get it."
"It’s really nice of you to say that, but I don’t deserve to hide behind excuses," she said, looking out across the room. "I feel like—well, I feel like a total prat, honestly. I mean, I meant what I said but I said it in the \textit{worst} possible way, and you didn’t deserve to be attacked like that."

"Thanks," he said. "Both for the apology and, well, for everything yesterday that wasn't an insult."

"Was any part of it \textit{not} an insult? It's all a horrible blur of shame right now, like how I feel when I take back a library book late, only multiplied by about forty because at least the library book was nicely treated in my care."

"You think I'm not some playboy who goes through women like toilet paper. Or something like that. And that I'm fit and charming." He let out the faintest of laughs. "The angriest compliments I've ever received in my life, to be honest. And my mum once shouted at me for playing marvelously and scoring the winning goal in a football match because I'd played on a sprained foot but hadn't told anyone."

"Well, she should have, that's wildly irresponsible," said Lily flatly, and laughed, not just at how typical it was of her to zero in on the silly thing he'd done, which surely merited a telling-off, but because \textit{he} had laughed. The knot of tension she carried in her chest allayed a little. "I did mean the nice stuff, though. I think you're a pretty easy person to like, and I really do want to be mates." She slanted a faint smile his way. "Not just for Algernon, either."

"That's good, since I'd love to have someone as thoughtful as you as a mate." He vigorously ruffled one hand through his gloriously unkempt hair. "Yesterday, when my mum was apologizing for putting me through all this, she started talking about how love is a two-way street, and—"

"You did all of this for your mother?"

"Er," he said. "Yeah. It's her dying wish."

"What?" She gaped at him. "Your mum is \textit{dying}?"

"Oh, no," he added quickly. "It's just the excuse she gave me. Since we're all dying, technically… Yeah, she's a bit mad. Especially about reality TV." He shrugged. "Good news is she's set on keeping a better eye on me now, thanks to you."

"Right," she said, gazing numbly him as she tried to comprehend the idea of a mother who went to such extreme lengths for such strange reasons. "Shit." She absently scratched at a bite on her arm. "I mean, when she came to see me last night I thought she was being a bit too generous with her compliments, but I guess if she's that committed to theatricality, it kind of explains it."

"She is 1000 percent committed." He dropped his voice a notch. "I, of course, luckily escaped inheriting that over-the-top gene."

"Try telling that to all the fish you put in therapy with your crazy thrashing."

He sat up straighter, stretching his knees out flat in front of him. "That was sheer pragmatism! How else was I supposed to help you escape—well. You know," he said with a meaningful look.

"You know you can say the word 'frog' without fear that I'll sink away into a dead faint, right?"

"I don't think you're fragile, I just didn't think you wanted everyone in the country to know about your worst fears."

"Well, that's extremely considerate, but don't worry about me. I'm a big, tough girl, and I can
handle the teasing." She nudged him gently with her elbow, and gave him a tentative smile. "We're
good now, aren't we? Like, mates, or whatever?"

"Oh yeah." He nudged her back. "Absolutely."

He had forgiven her, and she doubted they’d ever be mates in any real, non-reality-television-
bubble sense, but still, she had helped. Some good had managed to come from yesterday’s fiasco.

The day was heading towards a win for her, all in all.

Sadly for them both, but particularly James, the doors to the ballroom burst open and Helena
reappeared on the scene. She’d changed into a pair of simple flats and, for reasons only she would
ever understand, a flapper headband.

"I'm here!" she announced to the room at large, as if anyone could have missed her noisy arrival,
though several people were certainly trying their hardest.

"Alas," said Lily, with a despairing sigh, "your most adoring fan awaits your attention. We'll have
to work out our secret handshake later."

He snapped his head toward her. "Can we also have secret codenames?" he asked eagerly.

"Obviously," she agreed. "How else are we going to escape this place and start our brand-new lives
as non-misogynistic secret agents?"

His hazel eyes were alight behind his glasses as he pushed himself to his feet. When he was
standing, he started backing away while pointing at her, saying, "I'm holding you to that, Evans."

"Holding me to what?" she said loudly, and tapped the side of her nose. He would surely know that
covertness was an invaluable tool in the arsenal of any spy.

James tapped his nose in response, grinning at the same time, and finally spun away from her.

He looked real cute when he smiled like that.

No doubt he was perfectly aware of it.

Ridiculous man, she thought, smiling fondly at his retreating back…

...until a delicate clearing of the throat from Bea made her turn her head, only to see that she was
being watched, again, by all four of the waiting girls, not to mention Remus and a couple of the
production staff.

"What?" she muttered to Beatrice, trying to look as if she had no idea what everyone was staring at,
but failing on account of the warmth blossoming in her cheeks, and that same stupid smile that
stubbornly persisted in having its day in the sun.

She pressed her lips together. Better.

"You, like, love him," said Beatrice flatly.

"You're, like, overdramatic," Lily retorted.

"That's totally fine by me," said Bea, and extended her hand towards the dance floor, where James
was looking at Helena's gyrating body as if he was silently contemplating a life of celibacy. "I
know how much you adore dramatic people."
Lily hit her friend on the nose with the end of her own braid.

With most of the crazier ladies gone, James found the group date wasn’t nearly as painful as previous ones. Except for when Helena Hodge stepped on his feet, of course, but that was minor compared to basically everything else she had ever done to him.

After Helena came Lily, who had no prior experience but was pretty quick about picking things up. She had to keep explaining the moves to him and helping him keep the beat by counting out loud. Eventually James told her she should just take the lead.

If he were someone else, his masculinity would have taken a grievous wound to discover how much better he was at following salsa moves than leading them. Fortunately, he was himself. And Lily, for her part, managed to keep sending him into more complicated positions with elan while they both laughed from the sheer delight of having a good time.

She wasn’t technically the best dancer, though. Unsurprisingly, fitness instructor Isabella Marks already knew a decent amount of salsa dancing. James would’ve loved to have seen someone actually skilled manage it with her, if it wouldn’t have made him dead jealous.

"Hey," he said, after knocking his knee into hers for the fifth time, "why don’t you try leading?"

"Oh," she said, her eyes going wide. "I couldn’t. I don’t know how."

"I’m sure you can figure it out. You know hell of a lot more than I do about salsa."

"It’s just—it’s not right," she said, endearingly innocent. "That’s not how salsa works."

James tried to catch Lily’s eye over Isabella’s shoulder, but Lily was too busy watching Bea and Remus practice their salsa off-camera.

This was surprising, both because James hadn’t seen any of the ladies interact with the hosts—apart from Charlene and traitorous Sirius—and because he’d had no bloody clue Remus knew how to salsa.

And Remus knew how to salsa.

"He’s been holding out on me," James muttered as he tried to restart the sequence with Isabella. "He should’ve taken me to his lessons all along so that now I’d now be a salsa master, too. The dancing kind, I mean." He paused. "I wonder if there are classes where you can work on both the moves and the dish. Obviously not at the same time, though. Unless…"

"It’s all right," Isabella told him. "We’ll work on those things together."

He smiled at her, but of course doing so made him forget about his feet, and he brought down his trainer directly on top of her flats.

Her noise of pain was definitely not faked.

He got to apologize later at the cocktail party, and she naturally forgave him immediately.

"You didn’t mean to step on me," she said as they sat in the fairy-lit grotto, angled toward each other with their hands intertwined. "I can’t hold that against you."

The thing was, though, she added a small, subtle stress on the word that.
"Is something else bothering you?" he asked.

"Well," she said shyly, "I don't like being the jealous girl, but…"

"Wait. Who would you possibly be jealous of?"

"Well, it's just...you've been so chummy with Lily and she's wonderful, so I wouldn't be surprised if you—well."

James tucked a strand of hair behind Isabella’s ear. "Lily is a mate. Seriously. If you’d heard the fight she picked with me on our date, you wouldn't be so worried."

"You fought?"

"I mean, sort of? It's complicated."

"But you gave her a rose anyway?"

"Yeah, because—it made sense, promise. Besides, she asked me to keep her around for Bea’s sake."

Isabella smiled. "Aw, that's so sweet."

"I know. They're inseparable." He pecked her cheek. "Thanks for being straightforward. You make me feel like I don't need to worry about things."

"I don’t know why I was worried. Lily was such a dear, making sure I knew what really happened when Rita made that mistake about why they switched the date days."

Isabella was even willing to believe the best in Rita. Incredible.

"At least I hope she made a mistake," Isabella added, sounding puzzled. "Because otherwise—well. Never mind. It doesn’t matter what I think."

"No," James said, "it absolutely does. What were you going to say?"

She shook her head. "It’s just the champagne talking. Let’s talk about something else."

So they did.

They talked about being brown people in England and Arsenal’s coaching decisions and the best Thai restaurants in London. She spoke with enthusiasm about her fitness classes and the wonderful progress her students had made. She described her two brothers and explained that all three of them always went home for Sunday dinner with their parents.

James sat rapt through it all. There was just something about listening to people talk earnestly about their lives and the things they cared most about.

The fairy-lights definitely made it more special than usual, though.

The constant cameras, less so.

Eventually Rita loudly cleared her throat, which was a much better method than her former "drag James around like a psychotic child with a tortured stuffed animal” approach.

He kissed Isabella’s cheek in farewell, and followed Rita to Lily, who stood yet again at the buffet
No, that wasn’t fair. Last time she’d been under the buffet table, so it wasn’t really again. This time she was upright and everything.

Mostly. As he approached, she tilted just a bit sideways, catching her balance on the table with her free hand. Her other held a delicate champagne glass.

He heard her sigh loudly as she gazed down at the buffet, lips oddly downturned.

"You've a spread of food before you," he commented as he stepped next to her, "a drink in your hand, and yet you look forlorn. What gives?"

Lily took her time filling her lungs with air, then let it all out in a short, impatient breath.

"I'm pining," she said wistfully.

He took in the wilting garnish leaves that comprised more of the buffet than actual foods. "If you're after a bacon sandwich, I've found the kitchen less than well equipped. Much to my chagrin."

"Actually, I was pining for a croissant." She glanced sideways at him. "Now I'm pining for a croissant and a bacon sandwich, which is exponentially worse, and I don’t thank you for it."

"A croissant? Dear God, why would you want something French?"

"Why do you sound more offended by that than you were about the entire argument we had the other day?"

"Have you ever been to France?" He scoffed. "Smug bastards, all of them." He looked at her meaningfully. "All of them."

Lily swung around to face him fully, but seemed to do it too quickly, and had to pause, grab the table, and unspin just slightly.

It took a lot not to laugh. Rita tried to liquor them all up constantly, but Lily had always been the sensible one in the room refusing to give in.

"I feel like there's something deep and dark that you're not telling me about your beef with France, because they make excellent bread, and are therefore above such base hatred," she said, eyeing him with great suspicion. "Unless you hate bread, but you don't, because you like bacon sandwiches."

She tapped the side of her head with one finger. "I'm dead clever, me."

"Well deduced, Tipsy Sherlock Holmes." He added in a conspiratorial tone, "Or should I say, Ruby Raptor."

"I am not tipsy, as a matter of fact, you'll find I'm perfectly in control of my ment—" She paused mid-wave of her champagne glass. The booze-delay was strong in this one. "Ruby what?"

"Raptor. As in veloci. It's a hell of a lot easier to say than vermillion vixen. And who doesn't both love and fear dinosaurs?"

"Everyone should love and fear me," she replied, and set her mostly-empty glass down on the table with some difficulty. It was getting very, very hard for James to repress even a snicker. "What was it that inspired you, my bloodthirsty scavenging, my disemboweling claw, or my cold, dead eyes? I'd like to know for the sake of posterity."
He did let himself laugh then. "The alliteration with ruby, mostly. And because dinosaurs are wicked cool."

"I was hoping you'd opt for my excellent disembowelment record, but I'll set—" She propped her hands on her hips and frowned at something off to the left which had distracted her. "If you take one step closer, Helena Hodge, I swear to God I'll snog the face off him right this instant."

James found himself momentarily stunned into silence while his brain conjured tantalizing images, and the rest of his body started to process and react accordingly.

He shoved the thought away and forced himself to turn sideways, where he found Helena stalking towards the table as if righteously peeved. She stopped in her tracks and pointed a wavering, drunken finger at Lily.

"You hussy," Helena began hotly. "You're not even his type!"

James's sharp "Ha!" likely made it across the room, through the open (and stupidly) French doors onto the patio, and halfway across the garden.

Lily did not seem to have noticed, still staring down Helena and winning handily. "He doesn't have a type," she retorted. This was actually spot on—the only "type" he had was women who liked cats, but it was shocking to hear Lily name something he'd only recently begun to realize himself. "And if he did," Lily continued, "it wouldn't be handsy prowlers like you who don't understand consent and split their own chins open while fucking canoeing."

The booze had dulled Lily's balance, but impressively not her enunciation or wit.

Helena's hands tightened into claws, as though preparing to tackle Lily into the buffet table—James prepared to intervene for both the sake of Lily and the admittedly decent cheese platter he'd hoped to sample—but when Lily arched a cool eyebrow, Helena stood down.

With a murmured, "Typical Scorpio," Helena turned on her dangerously wobbly high-heels and tottered unsteadily away.

James shook his head, laughing, and picked up a piece of cheese.

"What a loon," Lily said happily, stealing the cube from his hand. "I'm not even a Scorpio."

He feigned an offended look. "There's an entire world of cheese arrayed right in front of us, free for the taking, and you resort to taking the one in my hand?"

"I figured that you wouldn't mind sharing, seeing as how I just saved you from Handsy Hodge, quite valiantly, I might add," she said, with a smile that would have made him relent if he had been offended. She reached up and landed a gentle pat against his cheek. "You poor, sweet babe. Helena's like a wild animal—senses your fear. You've got to come at her from a position of strength."

"Considering a strong breeze could tip you over right now, Ruby Raptor, I don't know that you're in a place to talk about positions of strength."

"Oh, you're so welcome for the help, Agent Melodrama. Shall I call her back and have you deal with her alone?"

He twisted his torso and awkwardly gestured along the length of his back. "I see you haven't met my new backbone. Funny, since it's been strengthened by you." He untwisted himself and faced
"There’s a suggested amendment to your presumptuous and inaccurate codename for me: Agent Strongback."

If Lily had been ruminating upon a witty comeback—though James was rather inclined to believe that she was quick enough to pull her retorts from thin air on the fly—it quickly lost itself in the distinctive raspberry blush that stole across her cheeks.

"I can’t condone the name Strongback. It gives off the impression that you’re a lot more muscular than you are," she said after a pause, with a crease between her brows that hinted at an unexpressed question. "How about you go for something a bit more film noir, like Jack Diamond? That sounds cool, and if I’m a ruby, we might as well be a matching set."

James’s heart lurched.

Jack. Diamond.

Jack Fucking Diamond.

It was simple and perfect and everything he’d never known he wanted in a nickname.

He lunged forward, throwing his arms around her and pulling her into a crushing hug, her arms pinned to her sides.

"Oh," she said faintly, a soft noise of surprise in his ear.

He pulled back and gripped her shoulders. "That. Is. Brilliant!" he said, grinning and gazing into her magnetic eyes. "Ruby Raptor and Jack Diamond. That’s a movie franchise right there, it is. Or at least a standalone."

She gazed back at him, her lips slightly parted, as his heartbeat notched a bit closer to normal. She smelled nice, almost floral.

In the corner of his eye, a cameraman crept closer, zooming in on their close embrace.

Right. Shit. Television: they were on it.

He dropped his hands to his sides, knotting them into fists momentarily and then forcing them unclenched. Because he was cool as a cucumber, he was, and this was not the sort of moment he wanted to share with millions of his most distant acquaintances.

"I’d make some quip about how disproportionate your excitement is, but I really like this idea," said Lily breezily, though the pretty pink color in her cheeks was sweeping merrily along her throat. "What do you envision happening in this movie? Algernon’s part of it, right? I definitely think he could pull off a jaunty, cat-sized fedora."

James made a serious effort at studying the cheeses, pretending to suss out which kinds were present, his thoughts definitely not anything of interest for the camera. "Algernon would probably tear the hat to shreds—and hats are insanitary anyway—but he’d definitely rock a black bow tie."

"Bow ties are cool, according to Eleven."

He snapped around to face her, mouth slipping into a grin. "The only way that could be a more trustworthy statement is if Ten had said it."

"You mean the fourth Doctor, right?" she said smartly. "Don't worry, I'm sure the cameras will edit
out the egregious error you just made. You wouldn't want to embarrass yourself on national television."

"Four? Four? You must never have seen Ten, because once you see him shouting against his impending demise, that scene is burned into your soul." 

"Ten has Four beat in one area: hair, which explains why you like him so much, which is really rather vain, and unfair on all us poor women who can't self-insert until Jodie's episodes air and she trounces all of them."

"Four's fashion choices are downright dangerous. He could have tripped over that scarf at any moment and choked to death."

"There you go again, self-inserting to prop up your flagging argument. Just because you can't complete a simple dance lesson without clumsily treading on my feet six times—"

"It was three, max!"

"I'm afraid you've just caught yourself in an easily disprovable lie, Potter," she sighed, and pointed to the camera that hung near them still, as if poised for James to pounce on her again. "If we're really to be a crime-fighting duo, I'm going to have to hold you to a far higher standard than that, so try harder next time, thank you."

A funny sort of feeling threaded its way through his chest, tense but warm, sending his pulse rocketing back up.

He found himself inexplicably grinning.

"Apologies," he said. "You're right, that's not my best. I'd get you some croissants as an apology but I can't endorse the French like that. You understand."

"Lucky for us both that you like Isabella, then. A basic willingness to get me a croissant now and then is something I'd quite like in a boyfriend," she said with a laugh, then nodded towards a spot behind James's back. "Speaking of, I think she's missing you."

He looked over his shoulder at once to find Isabella watching him longingly from across the room. For some reason his stomach turned, as though he'd been caught in some nefarious act, instead of simply talking to someone else as required by the show. He sent her a small, overly frantic wave.

"Oh, er," he told Lily, "yeah. Probably. But you know the sea witch—I've got to talk to everyone. Which is why I'm talking to you, of course."

He wasn't sure if he imagined the dark look that crossed her face, but it left as quickly as it came, replaced by a tight, rather pitying smile.

"Of course," Lily agreed. "Now you've put in your Rita-mandated time with me, you can move onwards and upwards, hopefully in the direction of a bed and adequate air conditioning."

"Right. Yeah." His hand found its way into his hair, his elbow pointed toward the ceiling. "Er, enjoy your day off tomorrow, or whatever."

"Mmm." She sounded rather indifferent. "G'night, James."

She spun lightly on the tips of her toes and left, moving in the direction of the glossy grand piano, where Beatrice and Remus were sitting together. James stayed stuck in place for a moment, eyes
trailing after her, unable to do anything but watch.

Lily didn't so much as glance over her shoulder.

"Perfect," Rita announced.

"Hm?" said James, drawn out of his reverie. "Oh, er, good?" He looked around the room. "Who's up next, then?"

"Wow," was Lily’s final assessment.

"I know," said Beatrice proudly. "Naturals, we are both."

"No, I meant, wow, that was terrible, and you should both stick to salsa dancing. That you can do without making me want to put my head through a plate glass window."

Remus laughed, and ducked his head in modest acceptance of his failures. Beatrice immediately slammed her fingers into multiple piano keys in a dramatic imitation of affront, sending a loud, discordant noise shuddering through the room. Several people jumped in fright.

"How dare you slight me in this impertinent manner?" she denounced, with narrowed, disapproving eyes. "I'd like to see you do any better."

"Better than the butchered rendition of Chopsticks you two just insulted me with? Yeah, I think I can." Lily shoved lightly at Bea's bare shoulder. Standing on her tipsy feet was beginning to feel like a chore. "Up. Come on. You too, Lupin."

Remus slid off the piano bench at once, but Beatrice mutinously stood her ground.

Sat her ground, really.

Lily didn't much care if she had to share a seat—the unusually long bench had had Clearly been put there with romantic duets in mind—so she plopped down next to Beatrice and nudged her over with a little more force than was needed.

"Watch it, Evans!" Bea cried, but shifted over to make room anyway. "What makes you think you can top my musical stylings? I'm a voice coach, yeah? Naturally gifted."

"A voice coach who plays piano like she's got sausages for fingers. What a sad tale," said Lily sweetly. "Formidable an opponent as I'm sure you are, I think I can dredge up something from eight years of lessons to help me beat you."

Bea frowned at her. "You can actually play piano?"

"Yeah, I can, and I’m bloody good at it, too."

"Like, properly?"

Lily shrugged, rotating her left wrist back and forth. "I've got my nan's old baby in my room at home. It's old and crap, and a bitch to get up two flights of stairs, but I won't be without her."

Beatrice made a small, curious sound under her breath.

"I'll bring it with me when we get our flat, and teach you to play, if you like," Lily offered, and smiled up at Remus. "You, too, since you'll be living so close by."
"I'm very much obliged," said Remus, with his hands in his front pockets. "Is there any reason why you haven't mentioned this before? The piano's been sitting here the whole time."

They had been getting filmed for television this whole time, she wanted to point out, and she wasn't desperate for attention.

That didn't seem like such an issue after four champagnes.

She inclined her head towards the nearest visible camera. "Didn't want to show off."

"But now you do?" said Beatrice.

"But now I do."

"I see." Beatrice spun in her seat and looked up at Remus. "She's peacocking."

"I am not peacocking."

"I knew you liked him. Knew it in my tubes."

"Amazingly, Bea, though I had a multitude of reasons to learn piano, impressing boys was never one of them," said Lily disinterestedly, and picked up the book of sheet music that sat on the shelf, "especially not that boy, so you can send your fallopian tubes my sincerest apologies."

All of the pieces in the book appeared to be slow and mournful, which was exactly the opposite of what Lily wanted. The last thing she felt prepared to do was serenade the room, and him, and her, with something cloyingly sappy and romantic, as if they were all living in a Twilight book and she was one of James's strange, supportive, pallid vampire siblings.

God. Isabella even had the right name for the job.

Lily was pretty sure she could play any number of upbeat pieces from memory alone, and that would simply have to do. If all the other girls got to swan around the mansion feeling bloody brilliant about themselves all night, tossing back drinks and winking coyly at the cameras, she deserved a shot at the same sensation.

Clearly, the best she was going to get from James was confirmation that she'd been foisted upon him by Rita Skeeter, and a blokey comparison to a bloody dinosaur.

A velociraptor, of all things.

Dinosaurs were wicked cool, it was true, and she understood the compliment it implied, but he might as well have punched her in the shoulder and referred to her as dude for all the good it had done her. The resulting effect would have been exactly the same.

This wasn't supposed to bother her.

It really pissed her off that it did.

She'd unpack it all in the morning, a morning that would dawn in this castle, thanks to the rose that sat in a borrowed vase in her room, hell-bent on vexing and confusing her all beyond reason. Until then, she would do something that made her feel good, enjoy the free champagne, and not look at James Potter again for the rest of the night.

Even if he tried to catch her eye, or shot that stupid, crooked smile at her, or said something utterly bizarre about the French.
Even then.

"What boy?" said Beatrice innocently.

"Don't be cute."

"I'm always cute," Bea countered, "and you *can* admit how you feel, you know. The most self-actualized among us can see the importance of honest expression."

"*You* can admit to whatever you like," said Lily, and replaced the book on its shelf. "I don't feel the way you think I feel and you're the one who can't accept it, so I reckon I'm more than self-actualized enough for the both of us."

But she reached over and tapped three fingers against the back of Beatrice’s hand, one after the other.

Her friend nodded sagely, and said no more on the subject.

*Bullshit,* Lily thought.

This whole bloody thing was bullshit.
Lily's night ended with a painful kind of confusion, and one sweet, merciful high.

Piano.

She knew piano.

Piano made her happy.

It didn't hurt her bloody feelings, like certain idiots in the castle.

She was good at piano. Better than good. Astoundingly bloody good, or so Sirius had said, after standing through a performance of Rondo Alla Turca that made Helena swallow her assertion that it "looked piss easy, anyway," roughly halfway through the piece.

She hadn't pegged Sirius as a fan of classical music, but people were always surprising.

Once Beatrice ceded the instrument to her friend's more capable fingers and found herself rewarded with a note-perfect Minute Waltz, Lily became surrounded by an invested crowd, including Rita, who owned herself impressed against her will. In an uncharacteristic move, Rita even allowed the group—save Isabella, who was so upset by Wendy Wilde’s departure that she went directly to bed, and Bonnie, who followed along to comfort her—to stay up for thirty minutes after the rose ceremony and make requests.

Lily suspected that it was Euphemia who truly ordained it so, being so delighted by the hitherto unrevealed talents of her favorite contestant that she was determined to have her show them off to every conscious being in the castle, and praised her loudly at every available interval. For Euphemia, Lily played two pieces, then several more for others, all the while doggedly ignoring James's repeated requests that she play "that song from the cat food adverts," because it was his and Algernon's favorite.

James Potter didn't deserve to have his requests granted, because he had hugged her, and it had done something—shook something loose in her otherwise orderly brain—and she was mad about it.

She should have had more sense.

She also should have had more resolve, for James eventually broke what little she had with puppy-dog eyes and hackneyed pleading. Lily wound up giving in to his demands and running through a lively rendition of The Entertainer that set him to beaming, effulgent as the sun, at everyone in the room, until Sirius thumped his arm and told him to quit grinning like a serial killer who had stumbled upon a log cabin full of horny teens.

Everyone had laughed and James had feigned affront, while Lily took a quiet moment to reflect on just how terribly uncomfortable she felt.

Fortunately, Rita ordered them all to bed immediately after that performance, and Lily left the room at once, keeping Beatrice's hand clamped tightly in her own. The last thing she wanted to do was give James an opportunity to thank her for making his cat food advert dreams come true, lest she find herself cruelly stung and entirely unprepared for it. Again.

It was even more fortunate for Lily, though less so for her liver, that she had thrown back so much
champagne throughout the night. Alcohol did what her traitorous brain could not have managed alone, and sent her stumbling downwards into a rather fitful sleep.

She felt as if she'd only been in bed for five minutes when someone shook her awake, jerking her out of a dream in which she and Algernon were hunting frantically for a secret stash of croissants.

"He's asleep!" Beatrice whispered loudly, excitedly, shoving Lily's prone body back and forth with the balls of her hands. "Wake the fuck up, he's asleep!

Lily's eyes searched for purchase in the inky darkness. "Who?"

"The security guard!"

"What?"

"Wake up," Beatrice insisted, and with one last shove for emphasis. "Up!"

"S'really dark though."

There was a shuffling noise, and the free-standing lamp in the corner snapped on to reveal Beatrice and Bonnie standing above the bed, the former fully dressed and grinning, the latter shrinking sheepishly away in her onesie.

They looked as if they'd been caught midway through the act of mummifying Lily in her sleep.

Rita, she was sure, would consider an in-house murder to be nothing more than a fun, money-spinning twist. In Lily's tired brain, the idea of the bachelor attending his first ever on-air funeral service—and the various ways in which the ladies would be forced to "comfort" the "bereaved" in his hour of need—became an entirely feasible possibility.

James could toss a final rose atop her slowly-lowering casket while Bozo zoomed in for an uncomfortable close-up and Rita lurked in the background, urging him to squeeze out a tear.

She laughed out loud at the idea.

"What are you giggling at?" said Beatrice.

"Nothing." Her own amusement had acted as a kind of stimulant, her eyes adjusting to the light, her clumsy thoughts swimming into clearer focus. "Explain again what's happening?"

"What's happening is that Donal the Dickhead is asleep in his chair, dead to the world," said Beatrice, swinging the end of her long braid like a pendulum. "Bon was just in the loo and came in to tell us."

"He's snoring like a freight train out there," said Bonnie.

"So I can sneak out and meet Remus, finally," Beatrice finished, with a big, bright, we're-in-this-together smile. "I need you to text Peter. He usually stays up late, yeah?"

Lily hoisted herself up on her elbows, catching a yawn in her mouth before it could struggle free. "Depends," she said thickly. "What time is it?"

"One a.m."

"You've woken me up after an hour of sleep?"
"Priorities!" Beatrice hissed, snapping her fingers like Lily was a servant on her very last warning. "You appear to have changed the passcode to your phone—"

"You kept threatening to send Peter questions about James."

"—and I need you to text him and ask where Remus is sleeping. Also, ask him what rooms have cameras in them. Also, ask him when they're rolling."

"You're aware that you have a one-on-one in a matter of hours, right?"

"Yeah, I know. We're going horseback riding." Bea mimed gripping a set of reins and did a silly little gallop on the spot. "What's your point?"

"Such an occasion will require lots of close-ups. Wouldn't you rather be fresh?"

"I will be fresh, once I've had mine," said Beatrice flatly. "Anyway, James won't mind. He's mentioned once or twice that he'd like Remus to find a nice girl, and I'm not the one he wants."

"None of us are," Bonnie said, sounding oddly bitter. "The audience are going to be so bored about five minutes into episode one when he sees Isabella and instantly mates for life."

"See, that's where you're wrong," said Beatrice, raising her finger for emphasis. "He likes Lily."

"He does?"

"Noooooo," Lily whined, and collapsed backwards onto her bed in what could only be described as a tribute to melodrama, pulling her covers up over her head, her stomach lurching unpleasantly. "Go away at once, Beatrice Booth, and dishonor on your ancestors."

"So very high and mighty, even when she's drunk," said Beatrice grandly. She yanked Lily's covers away, ignoring her cry of indignation, and tossed the phone onto the bed, grinning down upon her like a malevolent spirit come to inhabit her flesh. "Come on, text Peter. I want to surprise Remus."

Lily could have argued her down, but she was half-asleep, and Beatrice had been building momentum for this opportunity since the second she first clapped eyes on Remus Lupin.

She sat up, retrieved her phone from the mattress and swiftly unlocked the screen.

Peter Pettigrew liked to stay up late playing video games, and so the texts she received from him tended to arrive at odd hours of the night. It was likely that he'd respond to her quickly if she made contact with him. The deep well that was his desire to be useful appeared to have no bottom, even though he had no idea what Lily was doing in the competition, and had apparently never been curious enough to ask.

While Beatrice buzzed around the room, Lily quickly typed out: Can I ask you a couple of questions please?

Her message was delivered and read almost immediately, and in no time at all she saw the three flashing dots which indicated his imminent response.

Sure whatever u need!

Sweet, helpful Peter, Lily reflected. She'd have to find a nice girl for him one day. Or a nice boy. It was never wise to assume.

What rooms in the house have cameras in them, do they film 24/7, and also, do you know where
Remus sleeps? I SWEAR I'm not asking for myself.

Cams on most of ground floor + gardens except staff kitchens + toilets. No cams on other floors. Filming 24 hrs/day.

Is that it?!

2 expensive 2 kit the whole house out + no filming done anywhere else. Remus, Sirius, James + Mrs P sleep in west wing, third floor, corridor with big suit of armor. R's door labelled bedford suite.

Any security guards?

Not since u + James had that fight. His mum put a stop to it.

How nice, she thought bitterly, that James had been granted some liberty while the girls continued their confinement on the top floor of the house, watched over by Donal the dumb, the diaphoretic, and apparently drowsy security guard, Lily hated passing beneath his lecherous gaze when she scurried to the toilet in the middle of the night.

Of course, James probably didn't know about it, and Lily knew there was no sense in fostering feelings of animosity towards him for crimes he hadn't committed. It was childish, and besides, they'd never stick.

"You're good to go," she said to Beatrice, rubbing at her sleepy eyes. "Remus is in the west wing, Bedford Suite, near a suit of armor, and they don't have a guard."

"What if the guard is in the suit of armor?" said Bonnie, with a snort of appreciation for her own wit that she most certainly deserved. "And what's all this about James liking you?"

"Beatrice is sorely mistaken," said Lily, just as Beatrice piped up with, "Actually, they're into each other."

"Er, okay," said Bonnie, pulling a face at Lily as if to indicate that she, too, was concerned for Beatrice’s mental state. "I mean, don't get me wrong, I know you two are friends—"

"No, we're not," said Lily, returning her face with a flat look of her own, "and I don't know why everyone thinks we're such good mates all of a sudden. We're nothing, basically. We talk about nothing. We're like the Seinfeld of acquaintances."

Beatrice let out a snort. "And you say he's dramatic."

"I'm sure that's not true, Lil," said Bonnie comfortingly. "He told Isabella you were mates."

"And he told me he only talks to me because Rita makes him," Lily countered for the win.

That was a strange thing to feel triumphant about. It hadn't felt all that great to hear it from his mouth.

"When the fuck did he tell you that?" said Beatrice angrily.

"Last night, and it's fine—"

"Was that before or after he swept you up into his arms?"

"That was—" A spot buried beneath the pit of her stomach gave a quick, strange little shudder at
the memory. "Just him being a dork about something."

"Ah," Bonnie said, pity etched across the soft downturn of her mouth. "I'm so sorry, honey."

"It's really fine."

"I had an inkling after the dance class, and then tonight—"

"Honestly, I'm fine." Lily forced a smile and leaned backwards on the bed, stretching her legs out in front of her. The bites on her thighs were starting to heal over nicely. "I think he's fit. That's all. You don't need to look at me like someone's dying."

"Only my patience, for so very many reasons," said Beatrice, and closed her fingers around the door handle. She swung backwards, throwing a cheeky smile at Lily over her shoulder. "Fancy coming with me? I'm sure you can find James's room and give him a nice—"

"Get out," said Lily warningly, "before I throw my pillow at you."

Bea blew them a kiss and swooped out the door, leaving Lily alone with Bonnie, who was infinitely better company than the quagmire of new and confusing feelings she would need to attempt to wade through when she next found a quiet moment.

If one could find a quiet moment in this madhouse.

"So," said Bonnie, and sat down primly on the end of her bed.

Lily slanted a small smile at her. "So."

"Do you want to put on facemasks and not talk about boys?"

"Pass the real life Bechdel test?"

"That was my way of thinking."

Lily smile grew more pronounced. "Yes, I absolutely do."

James gave a huge, jaw-popping yawn and rested his head back against the car seat. Closing his eyes, he wished for a mute button on Rita, who was on her phone with someone else from the crew. Something was amiss on their date set-up, he'd surmised, but he was too tired to even broach the idea of caring.

Normally he slept like Sleeping Beauty, and often felt like one, but he’d tossed and turned enough all night that Algernon had threatened to scratch his legs silly. His usual plan for this sort of insomnia was to talk things out with Algernon instead. The maddening thing was, though...he couldn’t pinpoint what was wrong.

Something was off. This much he knew. Something had wormed its way into his head and planted itself right in his brain matter, sending up a flag and saying **HELLO PAY ATTENTION**.

But then, like a fiend, it had bloody hidden itself. It refused to be found. He’d been stuck sleepily digging around until his mum banged on his door to wake him up.

Rita kept nattering on in the back seat, but at least she hadn’t grabbed or hit him once since he’d stood up to her. She was still verbally demanding and often slyly rude, but that seemed to be her terrible baseline personality. He wasn’t going to succeed at threatening that out of her system.
She’d also been on board with sending home Wendy, who was now one of the least interesting participants left. This left him with Isabella, Lily, Beatrice, Bonnie, and, of course, Handsy Helena Hodge. Four lovely girls and one certifiable nutjob.

Another yawn sounded from behind James.

He stuck his head between the front seats to look back at Remus. "You too, eh?"

Remus, very polished in his well-fitted blue suit, had worse bags under his eyes than James. "I couldn’t seem to get arranged comfortably," he said, sounding resigned but smiling faintly. "I must have tried at least ten positions."

"Some nights are like that," James agreed.

"It almost felt like a work out, to be honest. That much moving around in bed can be exhausting."

The sleep deprivation was clearly muddling Remus’s thoughts, too.

"Er, yeah. Sure," James said. "Lucky I’ve just got Bea today so I don’t have to be on the lookout for random gropings."

"Oh, I wouldn’t be so certain. I’m willing to bet she could be a groper under the right circumstances."

"D’you think? She seems so cool."

Rita covered the bottom of her phone with her hand. "Stop talking about Booth off-camera," she told him.

James rolled his eyes and sat back properly in his seat, holding his untouched coffee.

Euphemia had summoned him to her room that morning to dramatically announce that she had a terrible migraine, and was devastated to miss a day of shooting. He’d kissed her on the forehead, made sure her curtains were thoroughly closed, and walked out of her room to find Peter holding a coffee so obnoxiously large that it wouldn’t have been out of place in America.

"Your mum asked me to get you this to ‘apologize for her absence,’” Peter had said.

James had taken it into the car, but his stomach wasn’t in the mood for anything quite yet.

He soon regretted not slowly sipping along the way. Once the car stopped outside a barn and he learned he and Bea would be horseback riding, he ended up downing his drink all at once. This was, to say the least, not pleasant on any front. But according to Remus, despite all the modern advances in technology, there was absolutely no chance the saddle would be equipped with a cup holder. And Remus, unhelpful sod that he was, refused to even try to fashion one.

As James entered the barn where Bea was waiting, his whole body gave one big shiver at the flood of caffeine.

"Right," he said, clapping his hands together. "Saddle up, Booth, we’re going for a ride."

Beatrice laughed, albeit pityingly, but he’d take it. "You’re so cheesy," she said, her eyes sweeping over him in swift appraisal. "Didn’t you sleep last night? You look about as tired as I feel."

He bounced on the balls of his feet. "Well I don’t know how you feel but I am totally fine, I’ve just had a lot of coffee and I am set."
"Well, I didn't sleep." She lifted her shirt beneath her arms and shook it out, as if to fan herself. "I think it's the heat, honestly. We're all being slowly roasted to death on the top floor."

"That's too bad. Did Lily sleep?"

Beatrice considered the question for a moment, then snorted. "Like an angel, until Bonnie and I woke her up." She laughed again, more pronounced this time. "She was not best pleased."

Remus cleared his throat. "If I might have your attention," he said. "On today's adventure, you'll enjoy a lovely horseback ride through bucolic fields, surrounded by nothing but nature. You'll pause halfway through to enjoy a romantic picnic by a lake, then return through a gorgeous set of woods."

"How lovely," said Beatrice, suppressing another laugh, and threw her gaze to the ceiling.

"All right," James said. "Let's go!"

"How much coffee have you had, exactly?" asked Bea in a low voice.

"Who knows! We're going to ride horses." James beamed as Remus led them outside the barn and towards a small paddock, where two magnificent horses awaited their arrival. "I love horseback riding. I mean, I've never done it, but I've always wanted to, but my dad always said he didn't trust horses not to throw me off, but why would they throw me off?"

"Let me guess," Bea said, "you saw Sleeping Beauty once, thought you could do a better job than Phillip, and now some unsuspecting horse is going to help you live out your wildest fantasies?"

He stopped in his tracks and stared at her. "How did you know?"

"Oh, it was Lily's theory. She bet me five quid this morning that if I said that, you'd say it was true."

"How did she know?" He shook his head. "No, no, that totally makes sense. Of course she'd know. Hey, look at our horses, mine's looking at me!"

Beatrice stopped by the paddock and threw a wary glance at Remus. "Is he high?"

"Not quite," Remus mused as James raced to catch up with them. "It's true he has always wanted to go horseback riding. So some of this is legitimate excitement, but I would speculate that the remaining ninety percent is the coffee."

James stopped next to him and leaned his arms against the wooden fence. "I never get coffee normally," he said. "Today is a good day."

"If his horse throws him off," said Beatrice to Remus, with the air of a mother discussing her naughty child, "ask Rita to edit out my never-ending laughter."

Remus placed a hand over his heart. "So noted," he said solemnly.

"I hate both of you," James said without taking his eyes off his brown and white horse. "But I love my horse. Let's go!"

A muscular young man with a long ponytail helped them onto their horses and took them through the basics. James was devastated to learn that his horse had the uninspiring name of Dolores, and that she was long past her days of going any faster than a leisurely stroll.
Still, though, he was on a horse! And so was Bea. And she might’ve been slightly better at telling her horse where to go but James certainly wasn’t going to admit that.

Once they’d finally set off on their trail, the horse man and the camera crew ahead of them, James looked at Beatrice.

"D’you know what Lily’s going to do today?" he asked. "I bet she’d like horses but I don’t think she could’ve come with us since this is a one-on-one and all and that would make three."

"Oh." Beatrice's brow furrowed in thought for a moment, her eyes fixed on the path ahead. "Well, she was slipping into her bikini when I left, so she’ll probably be in the pool until someone drags her out of there."

James took a second to process this, and then another, and then his face felt very hot. "Oh," he said. "That sounds...nice."

"In this heat? Sounds like heaven, except for the part where Helena's also there, doing her level best to ruin everyone's day, Lily's in particular."

James stroked Dolores’s mane. "Lily trounced her last night, it was so brilliant. Helena tried to come over and grope me, probably, or something worse, and Lily was like, Back off, Handsy Hodge. That’s what I call her too, you know? So funny. What does Lily do for a living?"

"Oh, she works in a shop, or something."

"She works in a shop?"

Beatrice threw a sidelong glance at him. "Yeah, and?"

"Oh no. That’s like really offensive, isn’t it, what I’ve just said. Or like the way I said it. Shit. Don’t tell her. She’s allowed to work in a shop, but I just thought—" He snapped his mouth shut and held fast to the reins.

"You thought she’d be doing something a little more intellectually taxing," Bea offered, "because she's so clever?"

"Well yeah."

"I guess she's got her own reasons for doing what she does. I mean, I don't understand why she didn't become a concert pianist, but there you go. She's great, right?" Beatrice was speaking rather quickly, as if eager to change the subject. "I had no idea she could even play, until last night. She held out on me."

"She was amazing. I mean, seriously, incredible. Mum tried to get me to play the violin for a while but it was rubbish, I hated it, I’d never get as good as Lily at an instrument. Maybe that’s what she does at the shop? Play the piano, I mean. If it’s a fancy shop, anyway."

"To be honest, mate, I think she just works on the cash register. We don't really talk about work, though."

"What do you talk about?"

"I dunno, lots of things? Our lives, our interests, our ambitions, our equally terrible dating histories, our families—she's super close to her mum but has an awful sister, apparently—oh, and we're getting a flat together in Camden when all this is over and our respective leases end, so that's fun to
plan for."

"That’s fantastic! Can I come over? I’ll bring Algernon. I think he’s going to miss Lily when this is all over."

Beatrice paused as her horse meandered over a dip in the road. "Yeah, if the cat's going to miss her, feel free to come over whenever, I'm sure she'd be happy to see you both."

"I can bring McDonald’s fries with me. Will there be a McDonald’s near your flat? Fries are best when they’re super fresh."

"Mate, don't you live in London, too? There's a McDonald's everywhere you look, and anyway, I'm sure if you were coming over she'd cook something."

"Does she like cooking, then? 'Cause I’m rubbish at it. Except nachos. I make wicked nachos."

"In that case," said Beatrice gravely, "maybe you should make her nachos." She hummed under her breath, a questioning sound. "You know, to make up for what you said to her last night?"

He snapped his head to look at her. "What? What? Oh God, did I say something? I mean of course I said something, I say lots of things, but did I say something mean? I didn’t think I said anything mean!"

"I mean, I don't know the exact phrasing, but it was something about how you only talk to her because Rita makes you do it." Bea frowned. "Yeah, that was it. Lily was sort of...well, not miffed, but I think it hurt her feelings a bit."

"Oh no," he said. "Oh no, that’s not what I—I’ve got to make it up to her. Somehow. With—things." He leaned in to Dolores, patting her like she knew better than he did, which of course she did. He sat back up. "I know! I’ll get Lily some croissants. It violates every single instinct in every molecule in my body but by God I’ll do it. D’you know where I could get some croissants?"

Beatrice was looking at him as if he’d lost his marbles. "You know you could just tell her that it’s not true, yeah?"

"Obviously, but apologies are better with gifts. That’s just science."

"Why did you even say it in the first place if it's obviously not true? It seems a bit cold to me, especially considering how often she's stuck her neck out for you."

"I dunno, I don’t—I only kind of remember saying anything like that, and it was—well we’d just hugged, you see, and—I dunno. I’m definitely getting her croissants."

"Personally, I'd advocate for more than croissants, but if you're going to be half-hearted about it…"

"No! Full-hearted! Help me, Beatrice, you're my only hope."

"Are you quoting Princess Leia at me right now?"

"I wanted to marry her for a very long time and I think you understand why." He nodded firmly. "She’s dead clever."

Beatrice leaned back slightly, and pulled at the reins. Her horse trotted forwards a few more steps, then ground to an easy, elegant halt, prodding at the dirt beneath its hooves.

"Fine," she said heavily, "I'll help you make things right, but I need to stop for a bit. I'm getting
motion sickness on this thing."

James pulled Dolores to a stop next to Bea.

His stomach lurched.

"Oh no," he groaned. "Oh, shit, why did you have to say that—"

He frantically kicked until one of the stirrups came loose, mentally promising Dolores that he would not sick up on her.

He swung a leg over the saddle, paused to swallow heavily, and jumped off.

The moment his feet hit the ground, the contents of his stomach flew up.

Gross.

Ten minutes, a bottle of water, and a shoulder pat from Remus later, James was sitting down on the checkered picnic blanket. They were nowhere near the lake, but it was still quite pretty here in a grassy field, some sheep grazing in the distance and a few clouds dotting the sky overhead.

If only he were in any shape to enjoy it.

Bea dropped down next to him as he rested his head between his knees.

"Feeling better?" She picked up an oversized strawberry from the currently unappealing fruit and cheese platter the crew had assembled. "Stomach turned the right way up?"

James gingerly lowered himself onto his side and curled up. "Which way’s the right way again?"

"I dunno, I'm a singing teacher, not a doctor." She tossed the strawberry at his head. "Sit up. I've had three ideas about how you can apologize to Lily."

"No sitting. No coffee. Ever again." He closed his eyes. "Hurl your ideas at me, not ripe fruit."

"Okay," she said, and proceeded with a loud clearing of her throat. "Idea one: hire a skywriter to fly past the house and spell out I'm sorry for saying that Rita forces me to talk to you, I'm easily bamboozled by hugs."

"D'you think they can fit that all in?"

"Probably not, which brings me to idea two: you heroically drown Helena in the pool, which sounds extreme, but as she's always stealing our stuff and insulting Lily's appearance and leaving the milk out of the fridge to go rotten, I feel like it's perfectly justified."

James pushed his torso up into a half-sitting position, hands still on the blanket. "*Helena* insults *Lily*'s looks? Seriously?"

"I *know*, right? My girl is a certified mind-blower." She cocked her head to the side. "Though, to be honest, it makes Lily laugh. She thinks she should merit a higher caliber of insult than that. Like, why go for appearances? That's so basic."

"And Lily’s *stunning*. Like, honestly, models *wish* they had her eyes. And her hair. And her smile. And her laugh’s really nice, too, you know, and like...*everything*.

"I mean, yes. Right," said Beatrice, and pressed her lips together for a short moment, before
coughing into her closed fist. "So, really, short of murder and needless expense, I'm sort of thinking you should go with idea three. It's the most radical, but I think it'll get you roughly where you want to be."

"Don't make me work for it." He let himself drop forward, arms quickly coming up to cushion the fall of his head. "I've nothing left to energize me." He turned his face sideways to look at her.

"Oh, don't worry, it's the best of the lot, and I've waited long enough to share it." She popped a strawberry into her mouth, but carried on talking as she chewed. "What you do, yeah, is you go back to the house later, you find Lily, wherever she happens to be, then you take her aside because you don't want to do this in front of anyone else—"

"For Christ's sake, buy a pencil sharpener and get to the point."

"Well, it's all pretty self-explanatory from there, right? You simply pull your head out of your arse and tell her the real truth."

"That I seem to tragically be allergic to coffee?"

"No, you three-act disaster," Beatrice huffed in exasperation, "that you're smitten with her."

He lifted his head from his arms. "My rapid caffeination and decaffeination is splitting my head in half so I must've misheard. I tell her that I'm what?"

"Smitten," said Beatrice simply. "Infatuated. Head over heels. Longing to hold her hand and talk about your feelings, and kiss her, and probably act out that sex dream she had about you that I've just remembered I wasn't supposed to tell you about, but screw it, it's all coming out in the wash now."

James gaped at her.

Surely he was mishearing.

Surely.

There was no way that Lily—Lily Evans—had had a sex dream.

About. Him.

Also, smitten?

But more importantly, sex?? DREAM????

He delicately pushed himself up, shifting carefully to not upset his stomach further, and turned over to sit on his arse, legs crossed beneath him.

"She had a sex dream?" He paused, his stomach swirling but not from the coffee. "She had a sex dream. About me. In which we were...oh no. Oh, shit."

That hidden thing he'd been long searching for finally burst out of its hiding place and shouted HELLO I'M HOME!

Beatrice stared blankly at him. "Is that really what you're taking away from all of this? Some dream she had about you banging her in a lake? Not the fact that you're so firmly entrenched in denial that your cat, and Remus, and even your mum are all getting impatient waiting for you to figure it out?"
"We banged in the lake? That’s so insanitary!"

"Her dream was the only reason I made you push her in, you clown. It was a hiliarious jape." She picked up another strawberry and held it aloft, the implied threat to his safety made quite clear. "And you'd be lucky to bang her anywhere after how you've been behaving."

James clutched his aching head with both hands. "Oh, no," he moaned. "Oh, this is not good. This is so not good."

"You say it's not good," Beatrice scoffed, gesturing toward the sky with her very threatening strawberry, "but I'm the one who has had to watch you gawk at her like you can't believe she exists every time she says something even remotely clever. I can't even begin to tell you how frustrating it is."

Bozo kneeled down behind Beatrice, pointing the camera perched on his shoulder directly at James. The lens winked in the sunlight. Rita grinned like a crocodile beside him, clearly savoring his pain as always.

"Fuck," James said. "Fuck!"

Rita ducked over behind Bozo and made a slicing hand gesture in front of her neck.

"Oh, fuck off, Rita," he told her. "I'm having an emotional crisis."

"Which I fully support," she said drolly. "So long as you cease and desist with the four-letter words."

He nearly laughed. He could have an emotional breakdown in front of her, but God forbid he curse.

"He doesn't think Lily's too good for the show, you know," said Beatrice airily, talking now to Bozo as if he'd just joined them for a spot of afternoon tea. "He said he did, but really he thinks she's too good for him, hence all the nonsense that brought us here today."

James whipped off his glasses, set them beside him, and mashed his hands over his eyes.

This was not how things were supposed to go.

This was not how things were supposed to go.

Because yes, obviously...James fancied Lily. A little. A bit.

But how could he not? She was hilarious and clever and beautiful and kind and she—she wanted better for him, and from him—and yes, obviously that was dead attractive.

But Isabella was sweet and thoughtful and optimistic and she liked all the same things James did. And he'd told her he fancied her—because he did—and she was already jealous of Lily and now—

Now…

"And?" Rita said.

Now there were bloody cameras in his face, waiting for him to moan on about this ridiculous realization, and he wouldn’t. He just wouldn’t.

James scrunched up his face. Then released it, exhaling deeply.
He picked up his glasses, stuck them back on, and looked at Beatrice, steadily ignoring the camera.

"I like Isabella," he told her. "All right? I do."

"Isabella is lovely and all," said Beatrice, "but let's be honest, she's not exactly dynamic, is she? She certainly doesn't make you laugh like Lily does. Plus," she added, with an unmistakable air of triumph, "she's got nothing to do with this conversation. Isabella's not the one you've been raving about all morning. Stop hiding behind her."

"So what if she’s not the most ‘dynamic,’ she’s—"

Another hidden piece of knowledge sprung out beside the first, waving a cheery banner of its own. Beatrice laughed like she could read his mind.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fucking Beatrice bloody Booth, coming on this date that should’ve been a dream come true, his first wonderful horse-riding experience, and not only did he sick up, but she came in here bossing him about and telling him about Lily’s sex dreams and then basically calling Isabella boring—

She didn’t have to go telling him all this in front of the cameras. She could’ve—

Well. She could’ve done something. He wasn’t going to sit here and admit that yes, Isabella was not...particularly exciting. That she wasn’t outrageous or hilarious or dramatic.

But that was fine, he told himself. He needed someone to balance him out. And he’d told her he couldn’t wait to start their lives together.

And she was probably nervous on the show! She wouldn’t want to make a fool of herself, like James always was. She had better self-control, was all.

"Look," he began carefully. "I’m not saying that Lily doesn’t have her charms”—fuck, she had so many charms—"but Isabella’s lovely in a different way, yeah? So don’t—just...don’t."

"I wasn't going to say anything, but you forced my hand," Beatrice retorted. "You likened my best friend to a chore last night, and hurt her feelings. Meanwhile I've had to listen to you talk on and on about how amazing she is all morning, just because you're too shit scared to say it to her face."

"I’m buying her croissants, aren’t I?" he demanded. "And I didn’t think she’d care about me saying all those things because—because I made it pretty clear about Isabella, and that Lily and I would be mates, and if she’s—if she’s having sex dreams about me, well, obviously that’s news to me, and like...I dunno, okay? I’m not going to tell her to stop doing that because that’s, er...yeah."

"If you really wanted to be mates, you wouldn't think twice about sharing your thoughts because you'd want her to feel appreciated. Friends are supposed to boost each other up." She grinned widely at him, a big, self-satisfied, you're-so-full-of-shit grin. "So, you know, if you're not scared and would like to make up for being a lousy mate last night, I'm sure you'd like to do that just as soon as possible."

"I’m not scared, that’s ridic—" He scrubbed furiously at his hair with one hand. "If I go tell her she’s brilliant will you please shut up about this now and also never tell her anything we talked about today?"
"I believe the words 'amazing' and 'incredible' and also 'stunning' were part of your repertoire today. Why don't you throw those in, too?"

"Whatever, just—do we have a deal?"

"You'll chicken out as soon as you see her," she told him, "but fine. I'll agree to it if you agree to have this chat with her before the next ceremony, and if I get a rose."

"Obviously you'll get a rose," he said. "Lily wants you to stick around, and so—er. Yeah." He coughed. "Also I liked you until today. Now I don't know if I'll ever make you nachos."

"You still like me, you're just being a drama queen, and we've already established that Lily's the one you should be making nachos for."

"Does she like nachos—I mean, er, never mind, it doesn't matter." He stuck out a hand. "Do we have a deal?"

"I guess we do," she agreed, and took his hand to shake it. Her grip was a lot firmer than he'd expected. "Have fun gazing into those big green eyes and wimping out like a coward, yeah?"

"Oh, fuck off," he said, and returned his hand to its previous position trying to stop the pounding in his head through sheer pressure. "I never wimp out of anything."

Lily was pulsing berries in a juicer during a swim break, her chlorine-soaked hair dripping water down her back and onto the Spanish-tiled floor, when Beatrice appeared in the doorway of the kitchen the girls shared. Her ceremonial rose was clamped between her teeth, and she announced her presence with enthusiastic jazz hands.

"Ta-da!" she cried, once everyone had noticed she was there, removing the rose from her mouth. "I'm back!"

"Yes, you're back," said Lily evenly.

"You're just in time for smoothies," said Bonnie, who was sitting next to Isabella at the breakfast bar. "How was your date?"

Beatrice let out a dreamlike sigh and spun into the room like a Disney princess roaming the empty halls of her splendid palace, nearly colliding with a boom mic. "Everything I'd dreamed of and more!" she trilled. "Had a lovely chat, we did. I think I really helped him out with a lot of stuff, you know? A lot of personal stuff," she added, with a pointed look for Lily. "As usual, my deepest instincts were proven correct. We're best mates now."

Lily felt herself tense.

"Helped him with what?" said Isabella, in the same tentative-yet-falsely-cheerful tone she tended to use whenever James was mentioned by another of the girls.

Isabella had been down all morning and had been since the cocktail party. Wendy had been a good mate to her before she left, and Lily suspected that Isabella had perhaps been expecting James to get rid of Helena first.

She also suspected, based on the number of mournful looks Isabella had sent her way since breakfast, that she wasn't best pleased by the hug James had sprung on Lily, either.
Lily had avoided being alone with her all day, and was grateful to Bonnie for keeping Isabella company.

"Oh, just a spot of self-actualization, is all," said Bea. "I think I've inspired him to start living a more open, truthful life from here on in."

"Yeah, well done, Oprah," said Lily under her breath.

Beatrice whirled on her at once, grinning, and slipped an arm around Lily's bare waist to spin her away from the counter. "Someone's still upset about being woken up in the night, I see. You know it was an accident, yeah?"

"You shook me awake."

"No time for that when I come bearing gifts." Bea handed over the rose. "This is for you."

Lily frowned at it. "What?"

"I mean, really it's my rose in the sense that I've been granted immunity, but I know James really wants you to have it." Bea's eyes flicked towards Isabella on the bench. "For friendship."

"Yellow roses are the roses of friendship," said Isabella tightly.

"She's right," said Lily, who knew that well, because yellow roses were her favorite. "They are."

"Funnily enough, we didn't happen to ride past any yellow-spouting rose bushes on the way to our picnic, so this is the best he could do on short notice." Beatrice pushed the rose into her hand. "Take it and put it with the other upstairs. He'll be real upset if you don't."

Lily suddenly found herself holding a rose, and her heart performing odd, disquieting skips. "What?"

"Later," said Bea shortly, and tugged gently on a strand of Lily's hair—no bullshit. Then she knocked Lily aside with her hip and took her previously occupied spot in front of the juicer. "Ooh, summer berries! Go back to the pool and I'll finish this up."

Lily would have argued Beatrice down, but Isabella's face was now too anguished to bear.

She opted to go back outside, ignoring a sunbathing Helena's murmured insults as she passed her by. When she reached the pool's edge, she set the rose down and hopped back into the water.

Lily had acclimated to the sticky, sweltering heat when she'd climbed out last, so the cold felt like a sharp and glorious shock. She let out a harsh breath as it shuddered through her body.

"I hope you drown!" cried Helena gaily.

"If I do," she retorted, knowing of Helena's unwavering belief in the supernatural, "I'll haunt you until they have you committed."

Then she struck out towards the other end of the pool, away from Helena's wailing voice, because she needed to think, and her head felt warm and clouded.

When she reached the other side, she leaned back against the pool wall and closed her eyes, tilting her face towards the sunlight.

She could think of only one reason why Bea would have returned from her date exuding such self-
satisfaction, and the thought of what she might reveal in their room later made her stomach bubble like an overboiled cauldron. While it was possible that Bea’s dizzying, girlish entrance had led Isabella to believe, however momentarily, that she had yet another love rival to worry about, the only part James Potter played in Beatrice Booth’s dreams was that of Lily’s eventual boyfriend.

Whatever Beatrice said, Lily decided, she wasn't going to put much stock in it.

James had probably mentioned her once on the date, in passing, and Beatrice had allowed herself to dream big. To Lily she had already confessed to envisioning a cheerful future in which Remus and James would come often to their flat in Camden for dinner parties, couples' game nights, and movie screenings, occasionally dragging Algernon and Sirius along for the ride.

That all sounded rather lovely, actually.

But unfeasible. Totally unfeasible.

James liked Isabella. Isabella liked him back. She was already talking about how excited she was for him to meet her family, take her on dates, and start a life with her beyond the confines of a camera lens.

And Lily...fancied James, yes, for all his sweetness and humor and strange absurdities. She was cognizant enough to know her own feelings. He had pulled her into his arms, sacrificing decorum to excitement, and something hot behind her ribs had clenched around a jar of fluttering butterfly thoughts like this was nice, and oh, and she liked this far too much, and that was it and here she was.

But that didn't change anything.

Her feelings were surely superficial. They'd never had a deep conversation because she was his filler—the mildly amusing person he talked to when Rita wouldn't let him be with Isabella—and James was as disinterested in really knowing her as she was in fighting to get his attention. Not here, anyway. Not on TV. She had some self-respect.

This wasn't a love triangle, it was a love line, and Lily was a dot sitting yards away on the same plane. She’d come here to gather intel, not to fall for the sodding bachelor.

If she could have quit, she would have, but Rufus had deluded himself into thinking she could win the whole show. He was having grand ideas about publishing a sensationalist article, wherein Lily would reveal that she was a plant all along and promptly dump her newly acquired boyfriend via print media.

Then there was Mary, who had called her once more since the day of the date to talk about what a splash it would make for Lily to publish her first article for the Quibbler shortly after grabbing the public's attention with her tell-all exposé.

Lily was caught between a rock and a hard place, and Beatrice was the only person there who made it all seem like fun.

Now, she thought, as she opened her eyes to see Bea emerge from the house, with a jug in one hand and a glass in the other, her friend was starting to make her nervous.

"Well," Rita drawled from Bozo’s side. "Finally things pick up a little."

James’s arms remained firmly crossed against his chest while he sat on the confessional stool in
"Come on, James, talk to me. I know you want to unload about your caffeine-induced ramblings. About how Booth negotiated you into a rose." He wasn’t watching, but Rita’s smile spoke volumes. "About how Lily Evans is much more interesting than old Isabella Marks."

"Isabella’s only two months older than me," James snapped.

"You’ve been perfectly happy telling me about how much you fancy Isabella. Why not tell me a little more about...oh, what was it you called her...Ruby Raptor?"

Heat flooded through James at the memory of his conversation with Lily. When they’d invented adorable, matched codenames. When she’d scared Helena off like a territorial lioness.

When she’d told him to try harder.

The echoing cadence of her voice, challenging and amused, made him shiver.

"Beatrice is very sneaky," he told the camera, arms still folded. "I don’t think she’s interested in me at all but we usually have fun together." He huffed. "Usually. Today she seemed bent on drumming up drama, and I had half a mind to send her home for it. I’m not much one for drama. But we made a deal and I always honor my deals. We even shook on it."

"You can tell us about the deal, James. We were there for it."

"I know it’s going to air eventually but that’s months off. The whole point of the deal was to not talk about it now. I paid for that silence and I’m going to keep it."

"I need more than a few lines for this confessional."

"Well, what else is there to talk about? How I’m apparently a complete idiot on coffee? How horseback riding should have been much more fun? How it’s usually Algernon sicken up, not me?"

"Oh, dear. What’s got you so annoyed, James?"

He flung his arms apart and down, his hands in fists. "You’re not shoehorning me into a love triangle, Rita."

"No," she said, one eyebrow arched. "I’m certainly not doing anything. Other than filming the events that unfold in front of me. Such as your meltdown when Beatrice pointed out that you fancy Lily Evans."

"We’re mates," he ground out. "That’s it."

"Ruby Raptor and Jack Diamond don’t sound like mates."

"They’re partners, obviously, and you don’t—don’t make it into something it’s not. I like Isabella."

"I believe you, Potter, I absolutely do. I think you fancy Isabella, but I also think…” She trailed off and sent him a smug look.

He would not be put into a love triangle. Even if Lily Evans made his heart race in a way Isabella didn’t, Isabella was wonderful in plenty of other ways. He was not going to make a fool of sweet Isabella on TV, and that was that.
"Right, then." Rita brushed invisible dust off her skirt. "You fancy deals, yes? You made one with Booth?"

"Well," James said cautiously. "It depends on the offer."

"Then here’s my offer: you speak openly about Lily Evans for the camera—and I mean openly, not some garbage you’ve made up—and I’ll let you go speak in private with one of your mates. Lupin or Black, your pick."

Fuck, but Rita was good. James would have sold his right foot for a chance to talk to Remus unmonitored for half an hour. Remus would know what to do. He’d know how to salvage this so that no one’s feelings were hurt.

His own mate, dangled like a piece of bacon for Algernon.

James scowled. "No deal," he told Rita. "That’s all you’re getting."

Rita’s lips thinned. "Have it your way, James. I hope you enjoy the three cameramen trailing you mercilessly until the group date tomorrow."

"Fine," he said, lifting his chin. "Bring it on."

The production team refused to let Lily return to her room, pointing out that she’d got over her cold, so her private chat with Beatrice was delayed until well after nightfall.

The rest of the day was strange, and the atmosphere loaded.

Bea wouldn’t say much, but enjoyed acting superior and mysterious, flashing Lily many knowing smiles and winking at her in an exaggerated fashion. Isabella was sad and withdrawn, and stuck by Bonnie’s side all day. The camera crew seemed far more focused on Lily than was usual, so much so that she was dragged into a random confessional halfway through the afternoon, placed on a stool, and asked if she had any thoughts pertaining to James that she hadn’t yet shared with the world.

"Oh, I never have thoughts," she told the camera. "At least, not since they implanted that chip in my brain. Want rose. Need rose. Where is rose?"

Rita did not appreciate her offering.

A catered, sit-down dinner—meant to be a rare treat—with the rest of the girls followed, and was deeply unpleasant for several reasons, wilted lettuce and wilting Isabella included. It was Helena Hodge, though, who really delivered the evening’s final blow when she climbed to her feet and revealed that she had curated a mental list of enemies to recite between courses.

"Firstly," she said, her narrowed eyes landing on a giggling Bonnie, "let’s talk about that awful, fiddle-de-dee crap that you call dancing..."

Her speech continued in this vein, much to the delight of Rita, until Helena had lampooned every woman at the table—plus, weirdly, the actor Cole Sprouse, who had blocked her from Instagram after an impassioned plea for his hand in marriage got a little dark—with the puffed-up pomposity of an elected official giving a public address.

It was pretty funny, or would have been, were Lily—malcontent, arrogant, cruel, and lying through her teeth about being an Aquarius, according to Helena—feeling at all inclined towards laughter,
and if Isabella hadn’t been so upset by her comments.

Luckily, Isabella had moved into Bonnie’s room a few days prior. This spared her from Helena’s nightly rages, many of which Lily and Beatrice were often entertained by through their shared wall.

Isabella’s low mood brought Lily a discomfiting feeling of guilt, too, try as she did to remind herself that she hadn’t done a thing to hurt her.

Something had happened which concerned Lily, somehow. Beatrice and Rita had all but confirmed as much.

Not knowing what it was made her antsy.

The fact that she even cared was bothersome.

All in all, it was a relief to finally head upstairs to bed and get away from the other girls, even if Beatrice delayed their chat even further by deciding that she needed to wash the stink of the day from her skin before she could comfortably dish the dirt.

By this time, Lily was so exhausted following her night of little sleep that it seemed as if Beatrice’s gossip would hold until morning. She climbed gratefully into bed and began to play with her phone while her eyes grew heavier, knowing that Bea only chose to bathe at night was so she could stay in there until she’d wasted at least half the castle's water supply.

It was a surprise, then, that Beatrice burst into the room not five minutes later, wrapped tight in her towel, her wet hair plastered to the side of her neck.

"That feels so much better, honestly, the heat was stuck to me and I stank of sweat," she said, her words spilling out of her mouth in a great, impatient rush as the door clicked shut at her urging. "Wait until I tell you all about today!"

"Hang on," said Lily, removing her tongue from where it had been clamped between her teeth. "I'm busy."

"Busy doing what, exactly? I have important stuff to tell you!"

"I'm searching through Cole Sprouse's Instagram for Helena's crazy comment."

"Now is not the time for Cole Sprouse, Lily."

Lily opened a pretentious looking photo from a professional shoot, spied a comment count exceeding twenty-five thousand, and hastily decided that learning the exact wording of Helena's threatening marriage proposal wasn't all that important.

"Why? What's your beef with the kid?" she said lightly. "He played Ben in Friends."

"Good for him, and while I pity any innocent soul forced to play a relative of that trash human, Ross," said Bea dryly, "I thought you might be a little more interested to learn that James is obsessed with you."

Lily's stupid, uncooperative body gave itself in to a not-unpleasant shudder.

She pressed her lips together briefly, and kept her expression neutral. "No, he is not."

"Except he is."
"Isn't."

"Is."

"Beatrice."

"I can do this all night, if you want," said Bea pleasantly. "I got more sleep than you."

Beatrice had once said that Lily loved dramatic people, and she was right—she frequently found herself drawn to those with a penchant for theatrics—so it was for that reason that Lily chose to ignore the rapid acceleration of her pulse, and the tinny voice at the back of her mind that wouldn't have minded if what she was saying were true. Dramatic people tended to exaggerate the facts.

James Potter was not obsessed with her.

He hadn't once shown a blind bit of interest in her.

Except for that hug, and his excitement about their codenames, and the way he occasionally looked at her with a certain softness in his expression...but she wasn't thinking about all that now.

It was an obvious fabrication, based on very little evidence, overblown by her friend's enthusiasm.

Lily had half a mind to turn over in bed and announce her intention to go to sleep at once, but she knew there was no escaping this crazy train. Bea would have her moment, the story would be shared, and the truth of the matter would lie several rungs beneath whatever heights she happened to ascend to.

"Explain what he did to give you that impression, then I'm going to sleep," she said, but opened another photo rather than look at Bea.

It was a rather pretty shot of some clouds. That Cole Sprouse sure liked photos of clouds.

Beatrice sat down heavily on her bed with a creak of springs, her towel riding up, essentially bound to leave a wet arse print on her duvet.

"So, we go on the date, yeah," she began, her voice low and affected, like she was poised to recount a thrilling ghost story to a bunch of campfire kids, "on our horses, or whatever, and he's wired to the moon about it—you were right about the Disney prince thing, by the way—"

"Knew it. You owe me a fiver."

"Anyway, I'm sitting there on my horse, minding my own business and wondering if we're going to wind up in the emergency room because my date is high as a kite on coffee and can't sit still, but then." She paused for effect. "Our boy James starts talking about you, and he just...never stops."

Lily glanced up from her phone and briefly caught Beatrice's gaze.

Her friend was smiling smugly.

Back to the clouds.

"This carries on for the entire duration of the trip," Bea continued, waving and twirling her hands with great enthusiasm to accentuate her words. "I swear, not once did he stop talking about you, and it was really nice stuff, too, like how incredible you were on the piano last night, and how you're much too clever to work in a shop, and how funny you are, and how great you are at putting Helena in her place—oh, and how you're so stunning that models wish they could have your eyes,
and your hair, and your smile, and—your everything, basically. That's what he said. Everything."

Another lamentable shudder rocketed along Lily's spine.

She let her phone fall to her chest, and dropped her arms by her sides.

"He did not say that," she said quickly.

"Yes, he did. On my life, he did."

"You know it doesn't count if he was just agreeing with you, right? Or if you had to drag it out of him."

"But I didn't!" Beatrice cried, and flung an arm out in the direction of the door. Her towel slipped a little, but she managed to fix it. "I deliberately didn't mention you, he did. Repeatedly!" She dropped her voice to a slightly lower register. "'What's Lily doing today? What does Lily do for a living? What do you guys talk about? Does Lily like to cook? Can I come and visit your flat? My cat's going to miss her so much.'"

"Bea—"

"No, listen, I know you think I'm exaggerating, but he even surprised me. I didn't think he'd be so obvious when he knows we're best mates. I dunno if it was the caffeine messing with his head, or something, because he must have known I'd tell you."

"Tell me what? That his cat's going to miss me?"

"No, that he's smitten with you."

Lily sat up straight, a fluid upwards trajectory, like Frankenstein's monster brought to life. Her phone slid into her lap.

She felt as if the contents of her stomach were curdling.

Also, her face was very hot.

She shifted further upright and crossed her legs beneath her.

"He wouldn't have said that he's—that he fancies me," she said weakly. "He likes Isabella."

"Oh, I know, I straight-up told him that his feelings for you were obvious, and he tried to deny it like a lemon—"

"You told him?"

"But they were totally obvious! He practically had a mental breakdown when I pointed it out! I thought his head was going to crack right down the middle."

Lily was still too stuck on the former part of that sentence to spare much thought for James's apparent mental break. "Why on earth would you point it out?"

"Why wouldn't I? He must have wanted you to know, on some level, if he was comfortable telling me all of this stuff. What was I supposed to do, let it go?"

"That's exactly what—" She shut her mouth, and took a moment to quell the instinctual urge to get angry with Beatrice, as if in speaking to James she'd placed Lily on the chopping block somehow.
"God, Bea, he's just a guy, I don't know why you're so concerned with him and me being—"

"It's not me, it's the universe," Beatrice countered, adjusting the end of her towel. "The universe wants you two together, and I am merely the vessel through which it operates."

"You are not a vessel through which the universe operates."

"Well, fine, if you don't think I'm special," Beatrice huffed. "How about this: my best friend, who I adore and plan to live with, has feelings for a guy who obviously likes her back, and I want them both to be happy, so I helped?"

"That's—" There wasn't a way that she could get mad about that and not come off badly. "That's sweet in theory, Bea, but—"

"You want to know why I got a rose after all of that? Bea interrupted, in a gentler, more sympathetic tone. "Because you want me around, he said. He was so angry with me that he probably would have sent me home, but you were more important to him."

A warm, clasping feeling—the same heat that had so arrested her when James hugged her at the party—blossomed in her chest.

"Tell me this didn't really happen," she said.

"I've got no reason to make it up."

"You realize that I have to see him tomorrow at the group date, right?"

"Correction, he has to see you tomorrow at the group date."

"After you harassed him about me," Lily retorted. "He probably thinks I had a hand in it."

Bea waved a dismissive hand. "He didn't. He doesn't. He was adamant that he wants you to know nothing about it."

"Because it'll make things awkward as arse."

"No, because it's true, and you're not a sure thing like Isabella," said Beatrice simply, unruffled by her friend's distress. "You didn't go chasing after him like every other girl in this house—he's probably scared that you'll reject him when he tells you how he feels."

"If he does," Lily corrected her. "If he even feels anything beyond indifference to begin with."

Beatrice shrugged. "Well, I happened to point out that if his feelings for you really were platonic, he'd have no issue in pulling you aside and repeating every nice thing he told me about you—you know, as a friendly compliment—and he agreed to do it in exchange for my keeping this all a secret from you. So no doubt you'll hear it all for yourself, soon enough."

"He did?" Her churning stomach ground to a halt and performed a gaudy flip-flop. "But...you just told me everything."

"Just because I made a deal with him doesn't mean I have to keep it. It only matters that he does."

"But that's—Beatrice," Lily whined reproachfully. "That's so duplicitous!"

"Hey, my loyalty lies with you, okay?" Bea replied, her eyebrows raised. "Not him, and especially not right now, when he hasn't put in the effort required to deserve you yet. Give him a couple of
days to adjust himself, then I'll reassess."

"Reassess what?"

"My approval of this union."

"There isn't a union to approve."

"Yet," Bea supplied. "There isn't a union to approve yet, but there will be, and when it does I'll be expecting a thank-you gift for my excellent work on this project." She let her body fall backwards, her head colliding with her pillow, and closed her eyes to the light. "One from each of you—don't cop out with a gift you bought together."

"You are overly invested in this relationship, and I find it creepy."

"No you don't, you're secretly chuffed that someone else can see you're a better fit for him than Isabella, but if you want to pretend you're not grateful, blame Rita for not letting us have books or telly."

"I'm not—" she began, but Beatrice wasn't exactly wrong. "When am I supposed to expect this strictly platonic series of compliments?"

"Oh, you shouldn't," Bea said. "I mean, he'll try, probably at the cocktail party where he can get you alone, but he won't be able to pretend he's not besotted when you're standing right in front of him."

"He won't need to pretend—he's not besotted."

"Believe what you want, but I know for a fact that I'm right. You didn't see the high level emotional breakdown he had at the picnic, once he figured it out for himself."

Lily had no argument to refute that point. She hadn't seen. Only Beatrice had, and Rita, and Bozo —neither of whom would ever agree to tell her anything—and possibly Euphemia, and with Peter having spent the morning at the house with the girls instead of on the date to spy, she couldn't just march up to James's mother and say, "I fancy your son—does he fancy me?"

Euphemia would probably be delighted to hear that Lily had a crush on James. She had confessed to wishing she'd had a daughter just like her not twenty-four hours earlier.

She'd only come here to write a bloody article.

"So," she said, after she'd heaved a sigh, "essentially, I'm supposed to let James take me aside for a private chat at some point soon, knowing everything the two of you talked about today, and lie by omission to his face?"

"Yep."

"And you see nothing wrong in that?"

"Nope." Bea turned her head towards Lily on her pillow, and flashed her a winning smile. "It's dead easy. Just be cool about it."

"You're always telling me to be cool about things, and it's never as easy as you say it is."

"Being cool is easy, you just need to work on it, and you will, at the group date tomorrow. Speaking of, d'you know what it is yet?"
"It was supposed to be an excursion on a yacht, but something fell through this afternoon and now it's paintball assassins. Peter texted during dinner."

"Well, well," said Beatrice coyly, turning her gaze towards the ceiling. "What a conveniently fitting date for secret agents Jack and Ruby."

"Almost as if they planned it, right?"

"Almost," Bea agreed, and let out a laugh. "Sometimes, I swear, you'd think we were all on TV."

Trapped in his room with his cat, his DVDs, and nothing more, James sank to the ground, his back against the door.

"Hullo," he said as Algernon crept up and settled into his lap. "Been lonely all morning, I imagine. I should’ve let you out to play with Lily, but you were asleep when I left."

He did not remind Algernon about the five sets of scratches he still bore from previous waking attempts.

"Mwreow," said Algernon, staring up at him.

James stroked the back of his head. "Never thought I’d be wishing I were at work instead, but even that would be better than suffering through reality television."

"Meow?"

"I know. That’s how bad it is. I’m even starting to miss giving Jenkins shit." James cupped Algernon’s face with both hands. "Rita thinks I’m alone and miserable in here, but I’ve got you, so that’s all right."

Algernon shook his face free, and James let him.

"The good news is you’re not wearing a mic so I can tell you everything." James paused and narrowed his eyes. He bent down to check along Algernon’s belly. "Just making sure."

Algernon’s head bobbed like he was nodding, agreeing that Rita was devious enough to mic a cat.

The story of the one-on-one date spilled out of James, as did the awful, brief confessional he’d been forced to film. When he told Algernon that he was quite possibly, and most unfortunately, in a love triangle, Algernon butted his head into James’s chest. He nuzzled against James’s t-shirt, purring, more affectionate than he’d been in days.

James squeezed him in a hug. "Cheers, mate. At least someone’s on my side."

He spent the rest of the day watching Disney movies with Algernon curled up on his lap. It actually didn’t feel like punishment since Disney movies were amazing. Being trapped also meant James had no chance to fulfill his promise to Bea.

He eventually passed out during Aladdin, and woke up to the DVD intro page on a loop and the distinctive sound of his mum’s angry voice in the corridor. Sunlight peeked through a gap in the curtains, falling directly across Algernon’s midsection beside him.

James rubbed his eyes and yawned.

"So help me God," his mum shouted at someone, "if you keep me from my son I will personally
string you up in the backyard by your neck and summon wolves to eat your remains."

James pushed his torso up, stretching out his legs in the process, and waited for his mum to enter.

She did so with a flourish, flinging the door wide open and crying, "My son!"

"Morning, Mum," he said blearily, as Algernon gave an annoyed growl.

While Algernon jumped off the bed to run for cover, Euphemia leaped onto the bed to throw her arms around James. "They jailed you!"

She was normally protective, yeah, but it wasn’t like Rita had hit him again. This was a bit much, even for her.

"I mean," he said, "only a bit. I didn’t fancy going out anyway."

She pulled back, resting her hands on his upper arms. "My sweet child. My dearest son. My—"

James’s heart sank. "Oh my God you’ve seen the footage."

She tilted her head, playing innocent, the fiend. "Whatever do you mean?"

"You watched my date with Beatrice."

"Well of course I have, but I can’t imagine why that should—"

"You’re about to have stroke of joy because Beatrice thinks Lily fancies me."

"She had a *sex dream* about you." Euphemia ran a hand through his sleep-mussed hair. "My darling boy. Finally helping this show become everything it should."

"If she had the sex dream, how am I helping—" He stopped, then batted her arms away. "Oh, fuck off. You think I fancy Lily, too."

"I always knew you’d see sense. Eventually. You’re quite thick sometimes. Especially about women." She sighed. "You get that from your father. And my father, too, come to think of it. In fact, truly all men are dim-witted about women—"

"Please stop talking. I am begging you."

"Rita cooped you up in here all day yesterday! You must be dying to talk about your newly realized feelings."

James pressed his lips together and scooted to the other side of the bed, where he let his feet connect with the floor. "As it happens," he said as he stood up, "no. I’m not."

Of course, he had been madly desperate.

Yesterday.

But after chatting with Algernon, and realizing how truly shattered Isabella would be if James so much as hinted that Lily sent his heart racing...it wasn’t worth it. Did he fancy two girls at once? Improbably, yes. He did. But he had chosen. And that was fine.

The show did not get to make a big deal of this.
His *mum* did not get to make a big deal of this.

"I’m your mother, James. You can tell me all about any sex dreams you may have had about Lily. Or should I say, *Ruby Raptor.*"

He scowled at her waggling eyebrows. "That was a platonic nickname," he said. "And I am never discussing my *sex dreams* with you, you utter pervert."

"It was the hug, wasn’t it, that got you hooked?"

"Christ, would you—I said I’m not talking about it."

Euphemia patted her hand on the space next to her, but James remained firmly in place across the room.

"Look," she said. "I didn’t support you the way I should have when we started this. I admit that. I apologized. But now I’m trying to be here for you. So you," she gestured at the place beside her, "should be here. So I can be there for you. Or here, as the case may be."

"I get that, but I don’t need your help about this. Nothing’s changed since yesterday morning. Not really."

"Lie to yourself all you like," she said airily. "But don’t you dare lie to me."

"You can be there for me by getting Lily croissants, all right? Like a lot of them. A *lot.*"

"That’s not all she wants from you," Euphemia sang.

James walked over to a wall and banged his head against it. "If you don’t leave now, I will knock a hole in this wall with my head to escape this attempt to force a conversation."

"Fine, fine." She stood up, smoothing out her skirt. "No need to be dramatic."

A hacking meow that sounded like a laugh came from under the bed.

Euphemia lifted her chin, shook her long, white hair over her shoulders, and made it very clear she had heard Algernon but was pretending she hadn’t.

Once she’d gone, James dropped to the floor to smile at Algernon. "Next time leave room for me down there, yeah?"

Algernon made a noise that was, like many of his sounds, difficult to interpret. James decided to take it as acquiescence.

As promised, the camera crew stalked him vigilantly throughout his morning routine, but James was getting very good at ignoring them and doing nothing of interest. He didn’t even butter his toast out of dedication to being completely bland.

Unfortunately, everyone else in his life was dedicated to giving him shit.

He and his unmerry band of forced followers paraded out to the car for the group date, where Sirius, Rita, and Euphemia were waiting.

Sirius clapped his shoulder by way of greeting. "Mate," he said. "Brilliant move, really."

With the cameras still rolling, James said nothing.
"Going for two of the girls," Sirius continued, as though James had spoken, "genius. Definitely the best way to hedge your bets. Or to break tradition and end up in a poly situation. Either way, well done."

"I don’t know what you mean," James said blandly, and pushed past Sirius to the car.

He blasted the radio the whole drive to the group date set. Euphemia insisted on one pit stop—which James was not allowed to participate in—and she emerged from the bakery with a bulging paper bag, tapping her finger to the side of her nose.

He managed a feeble tap back but not much more, then let his head rest against the window.

Rita had advised him to wear clothes "he didn’t care about too much but that still also made him look good." This made much more sense when they pulled into a driveway by a sign announcing **DELTA FORCE PAINTBALL**. Beneath the red-painted words was a small drawing of a person with a peg leg pointing a long gun at the sky.

James’s hand flew out to spin the volume dial down on the radio. He craned his neck around in his seat to tell his mum, "You bloody genius!"

She tapped the side of her nose again. "Mummy knows best."

She did, in a lot of ways. Less so than others. But it had surely been her influence that had brought him horseback riding, too. Even if that had gone less well than planned, but that wasn’t her fault.

She was shit at the romantic support, but she was supporting him in other ways.

He was going to play **paintball**. Finally! Another thing on the list of activities his dad had banned for James.

Admittedly he was less enthused about playing with a bunch of attractive women than he would be to play with his mates, who deserved some paint bullets stinging against their shoulders, but it was still a dream come mostly true.

James’s eyes slid over to Rita, who was tapping away at her phone as she had been the whole trip.

"If you shoot anyone on the production crew," she said without looking up, "you’ll get nothing but dry toast for the rest of your meals."

James looked in outrage to his mum, who shrugged.

"Get your revenge another way," Euphemia advised. "Ideally when they’re least expecting it."

The remaining contestants were already chatting outside the entrance building when James’s car arrived. He took a deep breath and stepped out, putting on the best smile he could manage.

"Morning," he called, and made a beeline for Isabella. He swept her into a hug and pressed a kiss to her cheek, drawing a blush from her.

"Morning," she said shyly.

"Rude," said Beatrice loudly.

James turned to her to reply, but then a ball of red paint exploded on the ground in front of him.

"Jesus Christ!" he shouted, jumping back.
A few flecks still managed to decorate his shoes and trouser legs.

He and everyone else immediately turned to the paintball’s origin, only to find the most badass person James had ever seen in his life wielding a loaded paintball gun.

"Constant vigilance!" roared the man, who had a wooden leg from the knee down, a mass of scars across his face, and a bright blue glass eye.

Isabella slipped a hand around James’s waist, drawing him close and clenching her fingers in his t-shirt.

"Oh my God," James whispered. "He’s amazing."

"He shot at you," Isabella whispered back.

"I know."

"This is Delta Force Paintball," the man announced. "My name is Moody and that’s what you’ll call me."

James found his eyes searching out Lily, who was looking at Moody as if she were a child meeting Santa Claus in real life.

He grinned, then remembered he was playing it super cool and boring.

It was hard to keep that composure, though, while Moody doled out equipment to everyone and explained the rules. Or, rather, the lack thereof.

"You’ll all head into the fenced-off territory at once," he barked. "No shooting until you hear the horn, but once that’s gone off, it’s up to you to avoid your enemies. You get shot, you come back here—you’re out. Last person standing wins."

James was bouncing on his feet, his goggles on top of his head, his gun—his paintball gun—fitting naturally into his arms.

Once they were all set-up, they headed for the back door.

"You get one minute to run," Moody said. "And you’d better make it count."

James nodded firmly, his blood racing through his veins. Isabella stood at his side. She kept biting her lip and looking around uncertainly.

"It’ll be fine," he whispered. "I’ve got a plan. Hang back for a sec out there, yeah?"

At Moody’s command, they rushed out the wide door, guns in hand. James immediately broke away and darted over to Lily, grabbing her arm.

Obviously, this would not play into his previous plans for avoiding Lily on camera, but he needed her. He’d just have to keep it professional. And the fact that they were in a high-adrenaline situation would explain the mass of butterflies that had invaded his stomach at the thought of this Lily-involving plan.

He jerked his head toward Isabella and tapped the side of his nose.

"Come on," he said in a low voice.
Beatrice let out a loud, obnoxious peal of laughter, slapped Lily on the back, and dashed off, her long, brown ponytail swinging from side to side as she ran.

Lily looked down at her arm where he'd grabbed her, then up at him, her brow furrowed.

"Fine," she agreed, "but don't slow me down."

Helena, dressed in a camo top and a pair of minuscule jean shorts, chased after a fleeing Bonnie with the energy and enthusiasm of a maddened panther.

With everyone else gone, James huddled with Isabella and Lily.

"Right," he said quickly. "Here's the plan: Isabella, you go hide somewhere. Lily, you and I go after Bea. I'm not allowed to talk about why but I'm out for revenge and you should be, too."

"What makes you think I'm not already?" she said, and twisted away from him, looking left and right. "She could do with a couple of bruises."

"Brilliant. Then let's head out."

Isabella, looking vaguely anguished, broke out, "Oh, I just hate this."

"It's okay," James told her. "Bea's got it coming."

"She really does," Lily said. "Don't worry about getting shot. I'll protect you—James probably can't, but I can carry him."

James made a scandalized noise. "I can, too."


"I know," said Lily longingly, her eyes taking on a faraway look. "Shooting people with non-lethal ammunition and teaching my conniving mates lessons—this is like Christmas. I wish we did this every group date."

James couldn't help but lick his lips, even though two cameras were pointed directly at them.

God, Lily was great.

And so was Isabella. She had principles.

"Go turn your gun in, then," James said soothingly. "It's no big deal."

"Oh, I couldn't." Isabella let the front of her gun drop toward the ground. "I don't want to be the person who won't join in."

James held his tongue—they didn't have time for this dithering—and did not tell her that she couldn't have it both ways.

"Why don't I shoot you?" Lily suggested. "Friendly fire. That way you didn't quit."

Isabella's eyes lit up. "Oh, would you? That would be so wonderful."

"Yeah, of course, only you'll need to get much further back—getting shot at close range hurts. I broke my ex-boyfriend's ribs at close range once." She frowned, considering this for a moment. "Of course, that's because I shot him in the back and he fell on a big rock, but the point kind of stands."
James only mostly repressed his laugh. "Right, then," he said. "Let’s get this going."

After Lily very kindly assassinated Isabella, splattering her shin with red paint, James and Lily rushed into the woods just as the horn went off. One of the cameramen hurried after them, while another followed Isabella back to the building.

It seemed that Lily had been formulating a plan of her own before James had pulled her into his own scheme. Once she had scanned around, checking that the immediate area was clear of all but the cameraman, she slung her paintball gun—which was attached to a strap that wound around her torso—over her shoulder and planted her hands on her hips.

"I know Bea's game," she informed him matter-of-factly, "and she's not going to come after us, so I'm going to hop up one of these trees and try to spot her from up high. Are you good on your own, or do you still need me?"

He shook his head. "You keep an eye from above, I’ll cover the ground."

"If you insist," she sighed, and jumped, her arms closing around a thick, low hanging branch. She swung her legs up to meet it and hooked them around the branch. "Are you sure you’re up to the life-threatening task of standing around down there?"

He nodded toward a low fence of corrugated metal forming most of a rectangle on the ground, a shelter of sorts. "Who said anything about standing?" James beckoned the cameraman to follow him into the shelter, where they both crouched down, only the tops of their heads visible from a distance. The camera pointed up at Lily, while James rested the end of his gun on the top of the fence.

Lily, meanwhile, had hoisted herself up and climbed further up, until all James could see of her was her long, pale legs, and a pair of battered white trainers with bright green laces.

It was quiet for a moment—several long moments—then she let out a snort of laughter.

"Helena’s in a clearing about twenty feet away, just slipped over in the mud," she said, keeping her voice at a normal volume. "D’you want to go after her, or do you want to keep on with this murder-Beatrice plan?"

The camera panned down to James.

"Not worth the effort," he said. "She’s probably just ripped opened her chin stitches anyway."

"Okay. Gimme a sec to find Bea."

There was a rustle from up ahead. Lily’s feet disappeared for a bit when she climbed up higher, vanishing into the leaves overhead, and James and the cameraman were accompanied by nothing more than the distant chirping of birds.

That, and a muted cry that sounded very much like Helena.

A minute later, Lily reappeared, swinging down on the same branch she’d climbed. She hopped to the ground, landed on one foot and almost stumbled sideways, but righted herself at the last minute.

"Bea’s by herself, hanging around by a bush that way," she said, pointing to her right. She pushed a strand of hair which had escaped her ponytail away from her forehead, let out a deep breath, then smiled at him. "Hi."
"Er, hi?" he said, standing up.

The damn butterflies in his insides needed to chill the fuck out. So what if she was strategic-thinking and gorgeous and into paintball?

"Is your tummy feeling better?" she asked, swinging the gun around from her back to rest in her hands. "Bea said you were sick yesterday."

"Oh, er, yeah." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I’m, ah. Fine. Today." He raised a finger toward where Lily had pointed. "That way, yeah?"

"That way, if you’re fit and healthy," Lily agreed, then pulled her goggles down over her eyes and turned on her heel. She stalked off further into the forest, apparently of no mind to wait around. "I can’t see Bonnie anywhere, but I don’t think she’s much of a threat."

He hurried after her while trying to step lightly, the cameraman their silent stalker. It was funny, really, how quiet this nameless, blond cameraman could be. He was the perfect choice of their options—James didn’t think he’d ever said a word the entire show, and his footsteps were as quiet as James’s.

"So, what’s our story here?" said Lily quietly, after they’d moved a few feet in total silence. "I know why Lily Evans wants to knock Bea on her arse with a paintball, but why are Jack and Ruby after her?"

James peeked nervously at the camera. "Er. I’m not sure, exactly..."

"I think she kidnapped my only son, Onyx Raptor," said Lily thoughtfully, "and is threatening to do something unspeakable if I don’t pay her a hefty ransom, like raise him with far-right ideals. We have to save him because I’m all he’s got—his father was killed in a tragic mining accident."

Enthusiasm swelled in James’s chest. Onyx Raptor was an ingenious name, a mining accident was a classic solo-parent explanation, and the kidnapping motive was a natural fit.

He forced down all the excited words that were fighting their way to his mouth.

"Er," he said instead. "Cool."

She glanced sideways at him. "Are you sure you’re feeling totally better?"

"Yup. Absolutely, I am as healthy as a cucumber. Er, I mean, cool as a horse." He pointedly stared straight ahead and swallowed. "So, how are we handling the attack: surprise, or something else?"

"If I was by myself, I’d hide behind a bush or something and shoot her down like a sniper, but since there are two of us, we can split up to surround her." She shrugged. "Up to you. As long as I get to shoot her, I’m not too fussed."

"Yeah, let’s surround her. I’ll charge, and you can get her from the side or back or something? You’re definitely owed the final hit."

"Sure," said Lily, though it came out rather weary, more like a sigh, "if you're going to be—" She stopped in her tracks, clamping a hand on his arm to stop him, her head whipping around in the direction of a clump of close-knit trees. "Did you hear that?"

James sucked in a short breath, following her gaze.
Nothing was moving, but he had heard something—

There. A few leaves of tall grass swaying wildly, like someone had just brushed past.

"Duck!" he shouted, throwing himself at Lily and toppling both of them onto the grass. He rolled off her immediately and aimed at the bush, just as Beatrice popped up, gun blazing.

A paintball burst onto the grass just shy of his left foot.

"Back off, Booth!" he cried.

She dropped to the ground just as two red paintballs slammed into the tree at her side, courtesy of Lily, who’d taken the shot while lying on her stomach, the gun propped on her shoulder.

"Come along, Jack," Lily said, grabbing his hand.

They heaved each other up and started running, with Lily taking frequent shots in Bea’s direction to keep her down.

A paintball whizzed by James’s ear—too close.

"Ruby, here!" James pulled her by their connected hands to another piece of corrugated metal, this one a single piece that came straight up from the ground, ending just above his head. They took cover behind it, panting, and both peeked their guns around opposite sides of the metal to shoot.

"So much for a bloody surprise," Lily said, glancing at him and grinning.

He shot a grin of his own back at her as several of Bea’s paintballs pinged against the other side of the metal. "No fun if it ends too soon, though."

"Fair point." She paused to take another attempt at hitting Beatrice. "Better than sitting in that boiling hot castle."

"Well well well," Bea called out. "Jack Diamond and Ruby Raptor, teaming up. Color me surprised and pay me my winnings."

"Give Ruby back her kidnapped son, Booth!" James cried, his shoulders flat against the metal.

"Don’t you mean," Bea said dramatically, "your son?"

James flung a look at Lily. "Ruby," he said. "Why didn’t you tell me?"

The barest hint of confusion crossed her face, but vanished quickly. "I’m...sorry you had to find out like this?"

"You lied to me!"

"Shout at me later—we need to get Onyx out of her clutches first."

James nodded firmly. "Right. I’ll run out to the side and loop around to her back. She can’t chase both of us at once—she’ll have to pick a target. I’m less protected so it’ll probably be me. I’m dead quick, though, so I can probably avoid her shots."

"I can keep getting closer when she does—there are plenty of trees between us."

"I’ll try to keep the kill shot for you—"
"—but if you see the shot, take it," she said seriously.

He nodded grimly. "Stay safe, Ruby. And don’t come home without our son."

When James ran off, leaping needlessly over a moss-covered log that a crawling baby could have cleared with ease, Lily leaned sideways against a tree and let herself catch the breath he’d robbed when he barreled her into the ground.

"Side stitch," she told the silent cameraman, who’d stayed with her instead of following James through the trees, perhaps concerned that he’d be struck down by a flailing limb.

The stitch was a lie, of course, not that the cameraman cared. Lily felt physically fine, but for her racing, inconstant heart, which had recently learned to skitter about in all manner of unruly ways. She blamed James Potter, bad influence that he was.

He'd jumped on her.

*Jumped.*

That was an oversimplification, and Lily could, for once, have afforded herself a little drama.

James had grabbed her and recruited her help, only to act as stiff and uncomfortable as if her company were a chore, then tackled her to the forest floor like a bloody rugby player, suddenly in the mood to play their little game of spies, all within the space of about ten minutes.

Lily didn't even have the time to think on what it meant—why he'd gone for her instead of Bea or Bonnie, if that should have meant anything, how she should feel about it, and why James kept touching her when apparently they were just meant to be mates—because he'd darted off like a rocket, and she had to find and assassinate her mocking best friend.

Her best friend, Beatrice, who was gleefully complicit in all of this.

She straightened up, mindful of the yelling voices up ahead—one male, one female, growing gradually fainter as they raced deeper into the woods—and pushed on through the trees, her gun trained in front of her, prepared for a sudden ambush. Beatrice Booth might have been faster than Lily, on account of her longer legs, but she was stark raving mad if she thought she was taking Lily down.

Lily would win this thing if she had to shoot the lot of them herself.

Bea *deserved* to be shot. She and James both.

Their son. *Theirs.* When Lily had deliberately added the tragic-mining-incident father to her tale to keep all inklings of romance *out* of the situation!

Sodding Ruby Raptor and Jack Diamond had slow-burn love story written all over them and any movie executive would have agreed, even if James couldn't see it, and now he'd doomed Lily to spend an agonizing half-hour discussing their fictional son on a confessional stool. Their names *matched,* for crying out loud. She'd been the biggest idiot in the world to ever suggest it.

It was all too stupid for words—the codenames, their plan, this entire scenario—and every ridiculous second of it was captured by prowling cameras. Lily had no choice but to act like it was all a tremendous laugh, lest she slot neatly into the role of Pining Girl and attract the amused sympathies of a telly-watching nation.
She'd been so excited for paintball earlier, expecting to spend a fun hour with Bea while James played the hero for Isabella, relishing the idea of shooting Helena once or twice, and barely holding in her laughter when she was pulled aside and warned against enacting revenge on Rita with her gun.

Then along came James "I'll take you this time, not Isabella, thanks" Potter, and ruined all her fun.

That wasn't entirely fair, she reflected. It was fun, really, only sort of painful. James was exponentially more fun than most people she knew. Fun sort of dripped off him, seeped into the air around him, bounced alongside him with boyish leaps and bounds. Under any other circumstances, in any other situation, if she wasn't falling for a man who didn't want her on national television, Lily would have been having the time of her life.

If he'd only been consistent, if he hadn't bloody tackled her...

The voices up ahead were growing louder again. James and Beatrice had slowed, or come to a standstill.

Lily pushed all other thoughts out of her head, and quickened her pace, her steps carpeted by the thick grass underfoot. Her conniving mate needed to be taught a lesson.

In half a minute, she reached a handy spot by a gorgeous alder tree—its low branches and plentiful leaves providing her some cover—just in time to see Beatrice rush into the midst of a small, mulch-logged clearing. Beyond her was James, who seemed to have outstripped her, dodging a flying paintball with an unnecessarily complicated forward roll across the muddy ground.

He could come out of this match without a drop of paint on his person, and still be the filthiest person in the group. Rita was going to throw a fit when she saw the grass and mud stains on his clothes.

What an idiot.

He'd been right in what he said, though. He was dead quick.

"I'm surprised to see you rushing into action like this, Cubic Zirconia," Beatrice was saying, her tone mocking. James sent a paintball at her and she sprang behind a tree, laughing. "Haven't we established that you're a bleeding coward?"

From where Lily was standing, James made for a far easier shot than Bea, and the thought flitted through her head for a second, wickedly appealing.

"I'll have you know," he said loudly, "that Danger is my middle name."

Beatrice screwed up her nose. "Christ. Not really?"

"Obviously not really, it's for the—" He made an exasperated noise. "Play along, would you?"

"Sorry," said Bea, not sounding sorry at all, "but your mum seems like the type to give you a stupid name like that. No offense."

"No offense?" cried James hotly. "My mother would never name me anything but the most noble, the most impressive—"

God, they were like children, arguing back and forth, neither of them getting anywhere.
Why was she so fond of people like this?

Lily could have caught Beatrice easily on the side of the arm, but that didn't have quite enough panache for her liking. Besides, her friend was never going to turn towards her as long as James was out there, darting back and forth to dodge her shots, sending paintballs of his own in her direction.

Only one thing for it, really.

She crept further into the clearing, keeping her body low, and aimed her gun directly at Beatrice.

"Ow!" she screamed in terrified agony.

Beatrice and James whipped around at once, two pairs of concerned eyes turning in the direction of her voice, two weapons momentarily forgotten, hanging loosely by their sides.

Constant vigilance, Moody had said earlier, yet Lily had successfully fooled them both with a basic damsel in distress act.

It took one shot to catch Bea neatly in the stomach.

Her friend let out a sharp, shrill scream as a paintball burst across her lemon yellow shirt, and clapped her hands to her abdomen as if afraid she might bleed out.

"You lying liar!" she cried, as Lily straightened up, laughing. "I thought you were really hurt!"

Lily stepped out from her makeshift hiding place, grinning smugly at her defeated friend. "And I'm grateful for your concern, really," she said, keeping the gun trained on her, "but more grateful for your stupidity."

"You brilliant, beautiful bastard," said Beatrice dramatically, "sending your inept sidekick in as a distraction."

"Sidekick?" he squawked. "How dare you imply—"

"She's just pissed because we took her down," said Lily, and tossed him a consoling smile. "Caught your forward roll, by the way. Pretty impressive."

His shoulders pulled back while his chin lifted. "Years of football practice paid off. Especially the way my mates play it."

"I knew he was a diver," Bea said derisively, then to Lily she added, "Divers like to pretend they're injured so the ref will—"

"I know what a diver is, thanks," Lily interrupted, "and I’m the one who faked an injury. Don't give my sidekick credit for my ingenuity."

"Top class work there, by the way," he said with a salute. "Well done."

"I call him your sidekick and he weeps, but you do it..." Bea let out an exasperated sound. "Why don't you two just kiss already?"

"Beatrice," James yelped, his cheeks reddening as he clutched his gun to his chest.

"You're a child, Booth," said Lily coolly, and looked at James, opting to ignore his overblown reaction. She jerked her head towards Bea. "You shoot her this time."
He pressed his lips together and wrenched his gun down to point at Bea. "Another stellar idea."

"Oi!" Beatrice squeaked, and backed away several steps. "Literally shooting the messenger? Really?"

"He's earned it. Go on," Lily urged him. "Then we can get Bonnie and Helena."

"Bonnie shot Helena in the eye by accident, so they're both out already," said one of the heretofore silent cameramen—the one who had been trailing Beatrice previously—touching his earpiece. "Looks like it's just you two left," said Bea, eyeing James's gun warily, even as it shook while he laughed, "a fact I'll gladly bring up at your weddi—" She screeched as a paintball splattered loudly against her shoulder. "This is my favorite summer top, you shits!"

"Why did you wear your favorite top to paintballing?" said Lily in disbelief.

"This is a summer top I'm vaguely fond of," Bea admitted. "Tell him not to shoot me again—this is outright bullying."

"Go back to the others, if you don't want to get shot." Lily gestured with the gun in the direction from which all three of them had come. "I'll follow you in a minute."

"Fine," said Beatrice, and made a big show of rolling her eyes before she turned and stomped away. "Jack and Ruby need their privacy, whatever, I know when I'm third-wheeling."

She picked her way through a clump of soggy, fallen leaves and vanished behind a tree, leaving Lily alone with James, and two seemingly omnipresent cameramen.

Lily only had to shoot one of the three, though this fact seemed to have escaped James entirely.

He took a deep, pleased breath, and held out a fist for her to pound. "Another win for Jack and Ruby."

She considered his fist for a moment, then pointed her gun at his chest.

"Nah," she said, "just a win for me, I think."

He blinked at her, as innocent and doomed as a stupid deer in headlights. "What?"

It might have worked on any other day, but James deserved it. He'd jumped on her.

She pulled the trigger without hesitation, and bright red paint exploded across his chest with a satisfying smack.

"Got your heart," she said, with a tight, triumphant smile. "You're dead now."

He let his gun drop down, hanging on the strap around his shoulders, as his hands pressed against the paint. He stared down at his colored hands, then drew his shocked gaze up to Lily. "But what about our son?"

Lily let out a dry laugh, and shook her head. "Nice try, but Ruby would never shoot Jack, even if he did neglect their secret love child for the past ten years. This"—she gestured in between them—"was Lily shooting James. Lily and James don't have a son."

His eyebrows drew together, the movement half-hidden by his goggles. "But I bought you croissants," he said in a confused voice.
This was so out of left field that she thought he was joking, and laughed again, but his expression didn't change at all.

She pushed her own goggles up and over her head—no danger now. "What?"

"Croissants. I bought you—" He paused as one of the cameramen took a step closer, zooming in on James's face. "As an apology," he clarified. "Because I, ah, said something stupid the other night, and I felt bad, and you wanted...you wanted croissants."

"I did, but then you said you wouldn't get me any, because you can't endorse the French," Lily reminded him. "You were pretty adamant about it. Was that the stupid thing you said?"

"I do loathe the French, but no, I—I think you know what it was," he said with a glance at the camera. He picked up his gun and fiddled with the trigger. "But I put my very reasonable hatred aside because—because I didn't mean it the way I said it, and I think you were hurt, and I—I needed to make it right."

Lily felt her face grow tellingly hot.

Why on earth was he bringing this up now?

"God, you mean—that was nothing. I'm fine," she said quickly. She didn't want anybody else to know that he'd hurt her feelings, least of all him, of all people. "It's not like we're—I mean, that's very nice of you, but really not necessary. You don't owe me anything."

"It's not about owing, it's—I wanted you to have them. And to say, you know, that I'm sorry, and everything, because this show is—it's mad, and I hate—ugh. I just want you to have something like this. And you don't—you don't have to take the croissants, but there's like a lot of them, and there's no way in hell I'm putting one near my mouth, so..."

Her face must have been so pink that they'd need to dim it down in post-editing. "How many?"

One of his hands rubbed at his hair. "Er...the thing is...I'm not actually sure."

"I only wanted one croissant, and it's not like I crave them constantly," she said, and bit back a nervous giggle that threatened to bubble up from nowhere. "How offended did you think I was?"

His cheeks tinged pink. "Ah...I had received the impression that it was...somewhat more than it seems you actually are."

"I can't believe you panic-bought croissants because Beatrice told you I was upset," she said. There was a strange, oppressive tension in the air that she felt compelled to break. "You shouldn't listen to her—she's got all sorts of hidden agendas."

"I didn't buy them in a panic, I bought them—"

"We need to return to the entrance," said the same cameraman who had told them of Bonnie's accident.

"Right," said Lily, blinking at him, then turned back to James. "We should head back before Rita sends Moody after us."

James nodded and pulled his goggles over his head, looking deeply uncomfortable, so Lily turned and led the way back to Moody, Rita, and the rest of the girls. She asked the talking cameraman—his name was Will, she discovered—questions about what his job entailed while they walked. He
was kind enough to answer them with enthusiasm, perhaps because Rita wasn't there to shush him or loudly disapprove.

Will even talked her through the workings of his camera, offered to teach her to use it one day, and told her that she was the most photogenic girl on the show.

He was quite flirty, actually.

Bold of him, as Lily was still wearing a microphone. She fully expected Rita to have words with him, once they got back to the house.

Alas, poor Will, she reflected, though knowing Rita, Lily would be the one who got punished for attracting his interest in the first place. Charlene had been booted off the show for fooling around with Sirius—fair enough, as the whole point was for the girls to brawl over James, not one of the hosts—but Sirius had got off with a meager slap on the wrist.

The lack of fair treatment on this show transcended every level of the production.

James was completely silent the entire way back, save for his feet, which crunched across the forest floor as if they were out for revenge against the ground. She looked back at him once and caught his eye, but he averted his gaze from hers at once, staring resolutely into the distance with his lips pressed together.

He was probably pissed that she'd shot him.

If he was, that was entirely his problem.

Rita seemed happy with the footage she'd got when they arrived back on the entrance, to a small smattering of applause from the waiting girls, high praise from Moody, and even a small trophy that Lily was allowed to take home with her. Helena, they learned, had taken off her goggles because she didn't like the way they looked, only to be shot in the eye almost immediately by Bonnie. Poor Bonnie had got very upset and spent the rest of the excursion being comforted by Isabella.

"Helena will be back at the house when she's released from hospital," Rita told the waiting crowd. "I'll update you on her condition as I see fit. Everyone, back to the cars."

Lily followed Beatrice to the waiting van, but was stopped by Euphemia, who placed a warm, wrinkled hand on her bare shoulder.

"Not yet, dear," she said, and pointed towards the second car, where James was leaning awkwardly against the rear passenger door. "Go and see my son first. He's got something for you."

Bea grinned wickedly and opened her mouth to say something, but Lily beat her to it.

"Take this," she said, shoving the trophy into Bea's hands. "I know what it is—be back in a minute."

James regarded her as if she were his executioner when she made her way towards the car.

"Croissants, I assume?" she asked, lifting an eyebrow.

He took a few reluctant steps to the open boot, and rested a hand on the rear bumper. "Right," he said. "So, at the time, I told my mum to buy ‘a lot’ because—reasons. But, er, thinking about it now, this might be a bit...ah..."
"Well, there's nothing you can do about that now," said Lily flatly. "Plus, I'm hungry. Hand them over."

He picked up a literal paper grocery bag nearly overflowing with buttery croissants and shoved it toward her, arms fully extended while he looked distinctly away from her. "Here."

Despite herself, and her familiarity with the Potters and their deep love of going over the top, Lily's eyes widened in disbelief at the sight of it.

They must have cleared out every croissant in whatever shop they'd stopped at.

"Are you serious?" she said.

"Sirius is over there," he replied vaguely.

She took the bag from his outstretched hands and stared at its contents.

Then she laughed.

"There are at least twenty croissants in here," she pointed out.

He lifted one shoulder in a shrug, still staring at the ground.

"I mean, this is more than anyone could reasonably eat before the rest went stale," she said, punctuating her words with stray giggles. "You absolute loon."

Again, James said nothing.

God, but he was confusing. All go one minute and silently sullen the next.

She wished that he could pick a mood, stick to it, and stop doing this to her, stop prodding at feelings that made her blush like a poppy, stop making her suspect there might be something—bright and warm and mutual—between them, only to snatch it back away before she had a second to tentatively consider it.

But he'd bought her croissants—or his mum had—despite his ridiculous vendetta against France and that was...something. Some indication that she mattered, or at least, that he wanted her to feel as if she did.

Lily turned and set the bag on the ground to her right.

It was so full, and therefore solid, that it didn't lean or sag sideways.

"Right," she said, when she straightened up, and took a valiant step forward. "C'mere, you."

He looked up at her with a light of curiosity in his eyes, but Lily ignored it, wrapping her arms around his neck, pushing herself up on her toes to better fit against him, and pulled him into a hug.

She felt his entire body stiffen beneath her touch.

Oh well. She couldn't take it back now, and he would simply have to deal with it. James Potter wasn't the only one who got to land unexpected embraces on people.

"Thank you," she said quietly. Her chin tucked neatly against his shoulder. "It was really sweet of you, and strange, but mostly sweet."
After a moment he relaxed into the hug, his arms coming up to squeeze her just so, and breathed out what sounded like a sigh of relief.

"You’re welcome," he said quietly, and then pulled away too soon, ending the hug before they’d really had the chance to make it a good one.

"I'll try to enjoy as many of these as I can," she informed him, hoisting the bag into her arms again. "You smell really good, by the way. Clean. Not like that awful stinky aftershave some blokes wear."

"Oh, er, thanks?" He grabbed the back of his neck with one hand, scuffing his foot against the dirt driveway. "You too."

"That's the scent of victory, I'll be bathing in it for the foreseeable future," she said with an airy shrug. "I'll see you tomorrow, then?"

A smile tugged at one corner of his mouth. "Yeah. See you tomorrow."

They stared at each other for a moment that felt suspended, heavy and awkward, in slowed-down time—as if both of them had something else to say, but neither could remember exactly what it was—then Lily turned, comically oversized bag of croissants and all, and walked back to the van.

Rita looked much too smug as James returned to their car. He sent her a two-finger salute and slid into the front seat, where he rubbed his hands on his thighs.

That had not gone according to plan.

He was an idiot.

A paintball-loving idiot, it turned out. An idiot who got swept up in things and left his intentions to be perfectly bland behind.

Thankfully Isabella hadn’t been there for any of it. And Lily probably wouldn’t tell her about Jack and Ruby…

But Beatrice might. In fact, Beatrice definitely would because she was an interfering busybody who apparently had nothing to worry about besides ruining James’s life. This was what happened when people lost access to the internet for too long!

Maybe if he snuck her a smartphone she’d lose interest in her scheming.

Curse his promise to Lily to keep Beatrice in as long as possible. And double curse Rita, who hadn’t said it, but was undoubtedly savoring every moment of James’s Bea-induced torture. Rita wouldn’t want to send her off, not when Bea kept throwing James head-long into situations ripe for reality television.

Because he definitely was in a love triangle. And he definitely did not want to be.

If only Lily Evans hadn’t turned out to be such fun. If only she hadn’t been game for making everything more fun and dramatic and silly. If only she hadn’t had a mind of her own and the will to follow through on it.

If only she hadn’t hugged him!

Yes, he had hugged her, but that was...basically the same. Shit.
At home he ignored his gleeful mum, an amused Sirius, and an inquiring Algernon who met him at the door. Instead James followed Rita into the confessional room and shut the door before anyone else could join them.

"Right," he said, plopping down on the stool. "Let’s get this over with."

Rita was doing her not-smiling-but-smirking thing. "You won’t catch me arguing over getting to the point. Have at it."

James took a deep breath and sat up straight. "Today we played paintball," he began, "which was a terrible idea because I didn’t even see two of the girls."

"Right," sighed Rita. "Get the commentary out of your system."

"It’s true," he pointed out. "I didn’t see Bonnie or Helena at all. And not just because Bonnie shot her in the face, which I do want to see the footage of later, by the way."

"Only if I can film your reaction."

"Right. Never mind, then."

He was so not cut out for this show, where he had to be guarded and careful or he’d hurt someone’s feelings.

He couldn’t lie and say he hadn’t had fun working with Lily, but he also didn’t tell Bozo and Rita about how right he’d felt next to Lily, their backs to a metal fence, working in tandem to bring down the enemy. How he never knew what Lily would do next and it was intoxicating. How even though he’d been covered in a thick layer of dirt after his parkour-type moves, and he’d later found some caterpillars crawling along his back, she hadn’t hesitated to hug him.

He saved all those thoughts up for Algernon, who was perfectly amiable about James’s lovelife for once.

He really seemed to be developing a sense of pity for James in all this. Unlike the previous long days spent waiting for the evening cocktail party, Algernon didn’t even try to escape James’s room at all. Instead James and his cat cuddled up for a continuation of their Disney marathon, and sending pained, longing looks at the wall chart counting down the remaining rose ceremonies.

Near lunchtime Euphemia barged in and insisted on staying with him until she could sing along with "I Won’t Say (I’m in Love)." Then he forced her out, replayed the song, and sang along himself as he preferred to do.

Algernon didn’t even claw at him for it, which was saying something.

Eventually, completely boneless after all his stir-crazy energy had left him, James was finally allowed downstairs to the cocktail party.

It was fine, he told himself. He had a plan. And tonight he was going to stick! to! it!

Then he saw Beatrice’s conniving grin and remembered he had a promise to fulfill.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, double shit fuck. So much for playing it cool.

When he entered the entrance hall, he found the women all in a line, facing the main door. He sent
a questioning look at Sirius—this was not how the parties typically started—but got only a wink in return.

The parties also usually didn’t start with girls looking distressed, and yet Bonnie’s mascara was already running a bit, and her bottom lip was trembling. Isabella was holding her hand tightly between them, saying something soothing in a low voice.

He smiled. She really was super sweet.

Then he realized smiling at a sad girl would look very odd, and instead turned to watch Remus come through the front door.

Only next to Remus was Helena actually—bloody Hodge, wearing a dress that seemed extremely close to exposing her nipples and also a bedazzled eye patch.

"James!" she cried, throwing herself forward with her arms outstretched.

He easily side-stepped her, leaving her to close her arms around nothing. He felt a little guilty for this, considering her perception was all wonky, but it wasn’t like *he’d* shot her in the eye.

"Er, hey, Helena." He took a tiny step back from her as she turned toward him. "Cool eyepatch."

"Thank you," she said primly, brushing nothing off of her dress. "It’s devastating for everyone that they can’t enjoy my beautiful eyes right now, but that’s why I need to protect it when it’s damaged. It’ll be better for everyone in the long run."

"Ah, yeah. Sure." And because he wasn’t a complete cretin, he asked, "Does it hurt?"

She pressed the back of a hand against her forehead. "It’s agonizing. I’m only enduring being out of bed to be here one last time with you."

"Last?" James asked much too perkily.

Just then Rita strode in through the door, looking peeved. "The doctor insisted that Helena leave the show immediately. She won’t even stay for the cocktail party."

"Not by choice!" Helena cried.

"No," Rita said sourly. "But the show can’t risk a lawsuit so Helena’s out. No one else is going home tonight."

James found himself grinning. "So we get to skip the rose ceremony?"

"No. We’ll still film it, but everyone gets a rose."

"So...what’s the point in doing it?"

"The point is I’m in charge, Potter, so stop asking questions."

James let his hands fly up in a "whatever, you win" gesture. Some things weren’t worth the fight on this show. Filming something pointless was not one of them.

After some quick deliberation and much pleading on Helena’s part, he allowed her to give him an overly handsy hug goodbye. It just seemed like the gentlemanly thing to do, when someone had been injured twice trying to win his affection.
She didn’t have any hugs for the remaining women, though. Instead she stood in front of them, flipped her middle fingers at them, and shouted, "You can all go to hell, bitches!"

Which was, truly, the only way James could have imagined her leaving: grabbing his arse, cursing at the girls, and being dragged away shouting by security.

He’d never have guessed the eyepatch, though.

From there Rita directed them to have the party as usual, which was code for *drink up, ladies*. But only Bonnie broke free from Isabella and headed straight for the champagne.

Thankfully this left Isabella alone. He had a promise to keep tonight, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t be respectful to Isabella about it first.

"Hey," he said, smiling as he approached. She didn’t fully smile back, partially looking over at Bonnie.

"I’ve got it," Lily told Isabella, and hurried over to Bonnie.

He brushed his hand against Isabella’s. "Can we go talk somewhere?"

She faced him fully, but her smile stayed a little tense. "Yes. Of course."

The ever-silent blond cameraman and Rita trailed them out to the pool. When James and Isabella sat down on the loveseat, Rita placed the two champagne glasses she’d brought on the table in front of them.

"Really?" James asked her.

"In case you get thirsty," she said innocently. "Now just pretend we’re not here."

Isabella placed a hand on his knee. "Forget them, James. What did you want to talk about?"

"Oh, ah." Shit. Maybe he should have some champagne. "Just—we didn’t get to talk much earlier, you know."

"No, we didn’t. I really wish they’d picked another activity. There’s no need for regular people to engage in such violent—" She stopped talking, and picked up a glass for a quick sip before setting it back down. "Never mind."

"At least it was the last of the group dates, eh?"

"Yes, there is that…" Her eyes wandered back toward the castle, dramatically lit as always by ground lamps.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes. Yes, I am, only—I’m worried about Bonnie. She was so torn up when Helena came in wearing that eyepatch. She feels absolutely miserable about what happened."

He squeezed her hand. "I saw you’ve been helping her out. You’re an angel, really."

She squeezed back, hanging her head. "I feel so horrible asking, but would you—would you mind if we cut things a bit shorter than usual tonight? I know Lily will manage watching her just fine, but I just—I would feel so much better if I could go keep an eye on Bonnie myself."
"Of course," he told her. "Absolutely. No issue at all."

"Thanks." She smiled again, this time genuinely. "You’re so understanding."

He eyed the champagne strongly, but wrenched his attention away and back to Isabella. There was no putting this off anymore, and despite the small voice telling him this would all be easier to do drunk, he resisted the alcohol’s lure.

"Right, er." He withdrew his hand from hers. "I need to—warn you, I suppose. About something I’ve got to go do."

She furrowed her perfectly sculpted eyebrows. "What’s that?"

"Before I tell you, you need to understand that this was not my idea but that I’m honor-bound to follow through. I also swore the person to secrecy about why I’m going to do it, so I can’t tell you what the deal was, but I—"

"James," she said gently. "Just tell me."

"Right. Well. I, er. I need to—I need to go compliment Lily to her face."

Isabella gave a small smile. "Oh. You had me thinking it would be something much worse."

"Oh. Okay. Good. Well, I know you were a bit jealous before, but like—it’s not like that, it’s because I have to."

"Beatrice is a very determined person," Isabella said.

"How did you—never mind, stupid question." James ran a hand through his hair. "The point is, I’ve got to. And we—you should know we had fun earlier, playing paintball."

She hadn’t been moving, really, but she still seemed to fall still.

After a moment, she said, "You did?"

"Yeah, it was—I was trying to be cool but we had a blast chasing Beatrice down."

"I see." Her mouth formed a slanted line. "You wanted revenge because she’s making you compliment Lily?"

"I mean...technically yes. It sounds weird when you put it that way because there’s more to, it, but like—sort of, yes."

"I see." Isabella’s large brown eyes searched his. "I see."

"So, er. Yeah. I didn’t want you to be surprised by anything you might hear. Likely from Beatrice."

She kept studying him for a few moments.

He couldn’t blame her—this was a lot to hear all at once. And it really did not sound good from her perspective, probably.

Finally Isabella asked, "Why did you give her croissants?"

He rubbed his palms on his thighs. "Oh, ah—forgot about that bit. I said something the other day that was pretty thoughtless and she was upset, so I—I bought her the food she told me she’d
wanted at the buffet." He leaned in. "I would never have bought croissants otherwise. I can’t stand the French."

That furrow in her brow returned. "Oh. Right."

"They were not romantic croissants," he added.

"That’s—a relief." She glanced up at the castle again. "I’m so sorry, James, but I can’t focus. I just keep thinking about Bonnie. Did you know her brother lost a leg in Afghanistan?"

"Oh, shit." James’s eyes snapped up toward the balcony outside the lounge. "Yeah, let’s head back."

Isabella held his hand on the walk up to the castle, but she remained somber and didn’t say anything.

He couldn’t blame her. No wonder Bonnie was taking this so hard.

When they’d returned to the "party," which was really just three other women, two of them comforting a crying one, James pulled Rita into the corridor.

"You’re not going to make Bonnie talk to me tonight," he told her.

"Not an option—we already lost Helena too early. We need more footage." Rita raised an eyebrow. "Not to mention I just allowed Isabella to walk away early."

"Shit." James rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, can we at least do Bonnie last? I know you’re salivating over me talking to Lily. That should be good footage, yeah?"

"Hmm." Rita tapped her lips thoughtfully. "I’ve reconsidered, Potter. If you’re extra entertaining, we may be able to revisit whether you need to speak to Bonnie."

James ripped his hand down from his neck to his side. "You are actually the antichrist."

"If only," she said, turning away from him. "Come on. Let’s see what a good show you can put on."

He trudged after her, feeling as though he were walking to his own execution, and stopped by the remaining "contestants."

"Right," he said, his fingers pressed to one temple. "I really do hate to interrupt, but I’d love to chat with you, Lily."

Lily looked at him for a long moment like she was silently contemplating his offer, as if Rita wasn’t prepared to swoop down on her and physically force her to comply if she demonstrated an unwillingness to move her legs.

"Right," she eventually sighed—so pointedly that it seemed almost as if she was imitating his lack of enthusiasm—then landed a gentle pat to Bonnie’s shoulder and stepped away from her. "Where are we going? Outside?"

He imagined delivering a bunch of compliments in front of a grieving woman and company, and grimaced. "Yes. Definitely."

He led them out to the fairy-lit grotto, which somehow maintained its charm even though he’d been groped here on no less than three occasions. Maybe it was his fond memories of Isabella, or maybe
he was just a sucker for ivy-covered pergolas.

"I think this whole production is suffering from a lack of imagination, if this is the most romantic setting they can dream up," said Lily idly, eyeing the overhead lights once they'd settled in. "You know what I think is romantic? A fairground. They've got popcorn and candy floss, you can snuggle on the ghost train, and trying to get in a snog before one of you vomits is like a high stakes game of chance. This is boring compared to that."

His mind had admittedly been wandering a bit, stuck on Isabella and Bonnie and everything else, but when he finally let himself look at Lily fully—properly, fully paying attention—her outspokenness combined with her stunning looks hit him like a gut punch.

"Don't get me wrong," he said, "I'm absolutely into candy floss and popcorn—not so much the vomiting part—but sometimes it's nice just to sit for a bit. Which is not something I've said probably in my entire life until now, but it's been...it's been a weird few days."

She made a small noise of agreement in the back of her throat. Her attention was still focused on the lights. "It's probably nicer when you're not on camera and can actually talk to the other person without feeling like everything you say is being scrutinized."

He placed a hand on his forehead and pushed it up into his hair. "When this show is over, I'm going to delight in all the things I never appreciated before: telling people what I really think. Walking outside without being stalked. Eating McDonald's fries whenever I want. You know. The really important things."

"Emotional honesty, a sense of physical freedom, and McDonald's fries," Lily said, her eyes flicking down to meet his. Then she laughed. "Top three priorities, yeah?"

"That and the internet. God, I miss the internet."

"I don't miss the internet so much, actually. I miss my books, and being able to eat whatever I want, and my mum." She paused. "I really miss my mum. I see her once a week, normally."

"Yeah?" James said.

"Yeah. She's magic." Lily smiled faintly. "Super observant, which I used to really hate when I was younger, but now I kind of love. Sometimes she knows what's wrong with me before I do."

"That sounds dead nice. She's probably much more normal than my mum. I bet she'd never force you to be on a reality show." He whipped his face to the camera. "I mean, my mum is the best in the entire world and I wouldn't change a thing." To Lily, he said in a low voice, "Can't be too careful with her." After a moment, he added, "I do mean that, though."

"I know that, and I get it. My mum can be a bit embarrassing, which I'm sure you'll see for yourself, since it seems you'll be meeting her soon." She let out a hard, displeased sound. "God, she's going to love you. Apologies in advance for all the food she'll shove down your throat."

"She's going to love me?" he asked delightedly.

Lily shrugged, then raised her voice to a higher falsetto, slipping into an Irish accent. "Oh, aren't you so tall and handsome? Please marry my daughter before she dies alone and has her face eaten off by one of her many cats." Lily's voice returned to normal. "I don't actually have a cat because my housemate's allergic, but Mum's never let the truth get in the way of a good story."

"But Bea's not allergic, right? So you can get a cat when you move in together."
"I've already told you I'm stealing yours, and there's nothing you can do about it because he's very clearly set on having me around and will mutiny, should you object."

"We'll have to work out a schedule," he said absently. "Like a timeshare."

Normally cat discussions would have had him blathering on, and playfully arguing about who got Algernon when, and investigating the possible proximity of their flats.

But he’d brought up Bea, and Rita was giving him a pointed look, and somewhere up in the castle Bonnie needed a reprieve...which meant James couldn’t put off his debts.

"Right," he said, bracing himself. "Look, I’ve got to—I’ve got to say some things."

Lily's expression shifted at once, her lips forming a harder line as she pressed them together, eyes darting back up to the lights again.

"So do I, as it happens," she said calmly. "I know why you brought me out here."

"Er, because this is basically what we do every cocktail party?"

"No, Potter." She dropped her chin, her eyes catching his. "I know about your deal with Beatrice."

Her words took a second to filter in through his ears.

Then he blurted, "What?" And then, "What the hell!"

"Oh, she told me everything," said Lily, with a curt nod, "pretty much immediately, actually. I'm going to assume some of it was exaggerated, but what it boils down to is that you asked her to keep some things to herself, which she didn't, and she asked you to tell me some stuff that, honestly, I don't even want to hear. I'm not interested in being a pawn in some stupid scheme, and compliments don't mean anything if they've been forced out of someone's mouth."

He sat there staring at her, mouth hanging open a bit like an idiot.

Beatrice fucking Booth.

Reneging on their deal immediately! The dishonesty.

To make matters worse, he absolutely should have expected it, considering she’d straight up played him at the lake. The woman had fewer morals than a bear, the most godless of all creatures.

"So, yeah," Lily said, after a few moments of silence, "you're off the hook. Congratulations."

Lily’s traitorous BFF might not have any sense of ethics, but Lily clearly did. She could have let him go on like a fool, but she hadn’t. She’d been straight with him like she always was because she was a terrific person.

He’d raved about her to Bea for a reason.

He shot up to his feet. "No," he said. "I’m not off the hook. Or I’m on my own hook, at least, and not on Beatrice’s, but either way you should know that you’re seriously fantastic, all right? She probably didn’t exaggerate—I was talking about you a lot. Because you’re—you’re funny and clever and honest and genuine and kind and creative and—and obviously super gorgeous, that goes without saying, but since I’m at it, I might as well say it—and Bea’s right that you deserve to have someone tell you all that, someone who’s not a compulsive liar, so you can trust that it’s actually true."
While he spoke, Lily sat and watched his face with a clinical kind of interest, the corners of her lips downturned, a tiny crease between her eyebrows.

The only hint that she cared at all for anything he'd said was the barest flush of pink across her cheeks.

"I already know that's true," she said, one hand toying with the stem of the champagne glass on the table. "Bea thinks you have feelings for me. Why is that?"

"Oh, I don’t know," he said sarcastically, "because I obviously—" He slammed his mouth shut, inadvertently warned by a slight intake of breath from Rita. Fuck, he needed to bring this down. "Because," he said, glancing at the camera and forcing himself to sound more normal. "Because obviously I think a lot of you."

"Is it common practice for you to mess people around when you think a lot of them, then?" said Lily, folding her arms across her chest.

"Mess around? I just told you exactly how great I think you are."

"That doesn't automatically negate everything else you've done."

He gestured helplessly. "What else I’ve—what are you even talking about?"

"I'm talking about how, half the time, you stare at me like a puppy, or touch me, or ramble on to my friend about how great I am, and in general act like you fancy me, and then the other half you treat me like I'm patient zero," Lily retorted, supremely calm, considering the accusations she was levelling. "I'd call that messing me around—I feel messed around, so if you'd care to explain what your game is, I'm all ears."

No one had ever called him out like this. Not even his mother, who sometimes had incisive insights that she loved to fling at him when he was struggling. But she’d never say anything like this.

Then again, he hadn’t ever had to pretend he didn’t love his mum.

Lily knew. She knew he liked her. And she wasn’t wrong.

But he couldn’t admit to any of that, and that burned, low in his gut. He couldn’t tell her in front of the cameras because Isabella—or worse, Beatrice—would learn about it, and he couldn’t have that.

"Look," he said. "I’m sorry. That wasn’t—it wasn’t about you. It’s just…" He waved vaguely toward the cameras.

Lily looked at the camera for a moment, then back at him. "I'm sorry, are you trying to say that you've been putting it all on for the show? What, was Rita not happy with you and Isabella, so she roped me in as some sort of pity-party contestant for you to dump on, and you just went along with it?"

"What?" he said. "Oh my God, no, that’s not—you've got the wrong end of the stick. In fact I wonder if you've even got the same stick as me at all."

"What else am I supposed to assume when you don't seem to think I merit an honest explanation?"

"An honest—" One of his hands clutched at his hair. "Do you not remember what we were just talking about? I would punch Sirius in the face if it meant I could be honest here. Also because he’s been a bit of a dick about all this, but that’s not the point."
"I see," she said, her tone biting, her eyes narrowed in a glare. "Because you can't tell me the truth on camera for whatever reason—probably Isabella, let's be real—you can act the way you've been acting and it's fine if I wind up hurt at the end of it? Her feelings matter, but mine don't mean shit?"

Oh sure, his mum thought. Put James on a show where a bunch of smart, attractive ladies got to see him make a complete buffoon of himself.

Because he was being one. Or had been being one, really. He had been cool to Lily for Isabella’s sake, and his own, but it hadn’t seemed like such an issue because…

"I'm sorry," he said in a low voice, and dropped down onto the loveseat. "I just...I didn't think you'd care."

"Why?" she said, her expression softening for the first time since she'd told him the truth about Beatrice's betrayal. "Because I wasn't all over you on the day we met? I can't do that kind of thing, okay? I need time to decide if I have feelings for someone, because making that kind of decision about a person in the space of two minutes is ludicrous, and careless, and it almost never works out."

She...needed time?

As in...she'd had time and it had passed and she now…

Maybe he had misinterpreted.

He cleared his throat. "So you—I mean, er. Bea told me about your, ah...dream...but…"

"Of course she did, she can't hold her water," said Lily resignedly. She sighed, slumping back against her seat, and tucked her hair behind one ear. "Joke's on her, though. I've had several she doesn't even know about."

Several she didn’t—oh Christ.

James sat frozen, his heart thumping against his chest, his face suddenly on fire.

No girl had ever admitted to anything like that to his face. Maybe none of them had ever had one about him at all, but to sit there and feel no shame—

Fuck. He was such a goner.

He cleared his throat again. "Er," he said, but no other words volunteered themselves after that.

"Anyway," Lily said, with another deep sigh. "Obviously, yes, I like you. For real reasons, not because we're on a show or because I want a rose. I don't care about any of that shit. You make me laugh, and I think you have a good heart, and we have fun together and, I dunno..." She shrugged, staring off to the side. "I feel sort of connected to you, I guess. There's some honesty for you."

Now the words I FEEL THE SAME WAY reverberated around his mind, but he bit down on his tongue to keep them from flying out.

She liked him.

She liked him!!

He was so screwed.
He was not remotely cut out for managing a love triangle. Although it was really more of a love angle since Lily and Isabella didn’t fancy each other, just him, so there really was no third leg.

But the shape was irrelevant and did not change the fact that he was in such a bind. And now it had been much too long since he’d spoken, and he had to say something because she’d just admitted to fancying him, and it would be terribly impolite to follow his instinct, which was to grab Algernon, run for the road, and hitch a ride to London.

If only he had some way to say aloud he didn’t fancy her, while silently indicating that he was lying through his teeth.

Maybe if he stood up quickly, turned his back to the camera, and winked?

Rita would murder him. But only after she forced Bonnie into a pseudo-romantic situation while she was suffering through tremendous guilt. Then Rita would shove James off the castle roof and be done with it.

He had to say something. Like, now!

"I don’t know what to say," he found himself saying, and feeling thoroughly inadequate.

She studied him for a few moments. Then she rose to her feet, smoothing down the front of her dress.

"Whatever. It doesn't matter," she said. "I'm going back inside. Beatrice wanted a piano lesson, so..." She pointed towards the house, swayed a little as if unsure of what to do, then dropped her arm.

He cast about fruitlessly in his head, certain that the right words had to be buried somewhere, but he kept coming up empty-handed.

Or, as the situation was, empty-mouthed.

At this rate she was going to change her assessment of him and deem him a mute idiot, for all the staring he did.

She shook her head and started to turn away. A second later she spun back to keep saying things to him because she wasn’t a wordless fool. "Look," she said, "it cost me a lot to have to say all that stuff on camera, so could you not tell Isabella, please? I don't want any more difficult conversations tonight."

"No," he said immediately, jumping to his feet and silently thanking his brain for finally supplying him with sounds to make. "No, I won’t—I promise. Just between us." He scratched at his arm. "And, er. Thank you. For being honest with me, even though I’m—stuck. And I won’t, er, be so weird with you anymore. I mean. On purpose. Sometimes things happen and I’m distracted or whatever, but I won’t—I won’t intentionally mess around, or anything."

"You say you're stuck like nobody ever told you that you're allowed to change your mind," she said heavily, then spun on her toes, her red hair fanning out behind her. "Whatever. Enjoy the rest of your night."

He watched her march away, her flats oddly quiet on the tiles compared to everyone else’s heels.

Her shoes might have been quiet, he thought as he wrenched at his hair with both hands, but everything else about her always spoke volumes.
"I'm in love!"

"No."

"Love, love, love!"

"I'm really not equipped for this right now."

"But, Lily," Beatrice whined, elongating her name unnecessarily, "I need to share my emotions!"

Though Lily fancied herself a supportive friend, she silently reasoned that three a.m. was not an excusable time to be woken for a confidential chat about Beatrice's third consecutive night of covert sex with Remus Lupin—a puppy in the streets and a wolf between the sheets, according to Bea—even if her insane mate was so smitten that she wanted to shout about it from the rooftops.

Lily hadn't even been asleep for very long, though the cocktail party had been cut short to facilitate the most pointless rose ceremony yet after she'd spoken to James. They'd given Rita so much "juicy" footage that the woman seemed to ascend to a semi-orgasmic state.

Rita had actually smiled at Lily afterwards, regaling her with such compliments as, "Finally, you did something useful," and "I'm glad I let him keep you after that fishing nonsense."

Keep her. As if Lily was a stray kitten and James a child who found her on the front step and threw tantrums until his parents let him strap a collar around her neck.

The fact that Rita's happiness had come at the expense of Lily's poise was...perhaps the worst aspect of her entire situation.

Lily hadn't planned on telling James how she felt about him.

She could have lived a long and happy life without him ever knowing.

The idea had been to explain that she knew about his deal with Beatrice, release him from it, and return to the party with her dignity intact. Nice and simple, she'd thought, until he'd leapt to his feet and launched into an impassioned speech about her many charms and what he felt she deserved from him, and the hypocrisy of it all had been too staggering to bear.

She'd wanted James to recognize how she felt so that he'd stop throwing her for a loop every time they saw each other, but in attempting to explain herself, she'd dropped herself on the scrapheap for public scorn and sympathy, so swept up in the headiness of her own thoughts that she couldn't see the wood through the trees. She should have thanked him politely and left the table. She should have gathered her thoughts before she tried to explain why it wasn't cool for him to say things like "funny" and "genuine" and "obviously super gorgeous."

She didn't.

At least she had inadvertently spared Bonnie the ordeal of a forced conversation with James. Bonnie really hadn't been up to it, clinging instead to Isabella and downing fast rounds of champagne after Helena turned up and took great pleasure in naming her a murderous villain.

Lily's timing appeared to be perfect. Bonnie and James were traveling to Reading in the morning to
visit her family, so Rita was sure to compensate for the lack of footage during their trip.

"I am tired," Lily informed Beatrice. "Report back in the morning."

"I can't, I'm too excited. Did I tell you he wants to take me to the Edinburgh Festival?"

Lily grabbed her pillow and stuffed it over her head.

"Suffocating yourself is not the answer," said Bea sternly. There was a short silence, followed by the creak of a floorboard, and suddenly Lily was being pressed face-down into her mattress. Beatrice had flung herself soundly onto her back. "Come on, stay with me. We can build this thing together."

"Bugger off."

"Standing strong forever," Bea continued, her voice ringing in the night silence. "He did things to me, Lily. Magical, core-shattering things."

"If you're about to give me a demonstration," Lily murmured, trying to shift Bea's chest off her spine, "I'd very much like to opt out."

Beatrice laughed and rolled off her to the side, wedging herself between Lily and the wall on her narrow single bed. She slipped an arm around Lily's back and squeezed softly.

"Don't be sad, my little red hen, it'll all work out in the end," she cooed.

Lily removed the pillow from atop her head and tucked it beneath her chin, where it had previously been resting when Beatrice crept into the room and woke her up. "I'm not sad."

"James doesn't deserve your beautiful, darling self if he's going to be such a fucking wimp, and I fully intend to tell him as much in front of my entire family."

"Please don't bring your entire family into this."

"You don't think he knows how to sign, do you? Only my sister and I have a thing where we bitch about people right under their noses—"

"How about you just act cordial, and try to enjoy the day?" Lily suggested. "I don't need anyone to champion me, and besides, if you and Remus wind up together—"

"We are together."

"—you'll likely be seeing James a lot."

"See, here's the thing. Remus and I were talking about you two in bed just now—"

"Whatever gets you off, I suppose."

"He thinks I'm being too hard on James, says he's afraid to admit that he likes you on camera because he's trying to protect Isabella's delicate feelings, and that—"

"Amazingly, Bea, I don't need Remus to tell me that," Lily interrupted. She flipped onto her back, a process that was slowed and complicated by Beatrice's presence in her bed. "I know that. You should've seen his face when I told him I liked him. He can't hide anything—he looked as if I'd just presented him with his very own pirate ship."
"You think he'd like a pirate ship?"

"I think he'd sell one of his organs for his own pirate ship, but it doesn't matter. He's set on Isabella and I've said what I had to say to make him stop acting like a prat, so we'll get through this stupid visit with my mum, come back here, and he'll send me home at the next ceremony."

"He won't send you home."

"He will," said Lily, then added, "Probably. Yes, after last night. He must know I want him to."

"And you're happy with that?"

Lily didn't think it needed to be said that she wasn't happy with that.

She had feelings for James, and they couldn't have been more inconvenient, or poorly timed. She wanted to kiss him and hold his hand, and go on normal dates without the albatross of a television camera hanging around their necks, but she'd never get the chance to do any of those things because of bloody Isabella Marks, who was such a sweet person that Lily couldn't even dislike her for it.

It was beyond frustrating that James would be so taciturn, like a tub of ice cream she'd dug out of the freezer, too stiff and frozen to penetrate with the tip of her spoon. Lily knew that they had something, even if she wasn't quite sure what it was. She knew her feelings weren't wholly unreciprocated. James might have been unwilling to be honest, but nobody could ever have accused him of subtlety.

That stupid idiot, deciding upon Isabella from the very first moment because he couldn't give himself a minute to consider the implications of his own rashness. A cat would have had better impulse control.

His cat did have better impulse control.

"You know what I'm not happy with?" she ventured. "All of this talk about men. I'm sick of men. They're not worth our trouble or our time—"

"Except Remus."

"I suppose Remus passes," Lily admitted, "but I came here to write an article and it got buried under this pointless romantic nonsense. I should be thinking about that instead of talking about James Potter."

Beatrice shifted on the bed next to her, pressed her cheek to her shoulder. "Don't you already have a lot of that written?"

"No, it's still in the planning stage."

"You wrote a draft of it on your phone."

"A rough draft, and it's not like you can plan too much for something."

The problem was, save for a major scandal involving Rita that she could use to turn her article into her magnum opus, Lily felt as if she'd gotten more than enough information to be getting on with. It was clear to her that no further investigation was warranted, so she was stuck at a dead end until she could get out—a fact she had explained to Rufus, once on the phone and several times by text.
All logic dictated that now was the time to up and quit the show, but Rufus wouldn't hear of it. He wanted her to go all the way. He wanted the winner of the show to be the same person who exposed it.

Bloody Rufus Scrimgeour, refusing to let her leave.

Bloody James Potter, making her want a reason to stay.

Curse this bloody show and everyone involved in it for making every step of this process ten times more painful than it had to be, and for inevitably dragging her mother into the fray, days from now. That was going to be an awkward mess, and Lily could only thank her lucky stars that she was able to text her mother in the meantime to prep her for the occasion.

Her mum would still be in raptures over James, though. She'd still find some way to stick a matchmaking oar in.

Lily's family visit was scheduled for last, which seemed like a strategic ploy on Rita's part. She was probably hoping that James would pine for her during the separation, prompting an unexpected confession of love as they sat by the grimy old river and shared a tub of mushy peas outside the one decent fish and chip shop Cokeworth had to offer.

Someone ought to have told Rita that her eyes were bigger than her stomach.

Besides, Lily reflected, as Beatrice pressed a comforting kiss to the side of her head, they were definitely getting Chinese food when they went to visit her mum.

Algernon was not remotely shocked to learn that Lily really fancied James.

"You could have told me," James told him with a scowl. "I had a right to know."

Algernon’s recent amiability tapered after that, and he didn’t even cuddle up with James at night, instead commandeering a pillow for himself.

His mum fussed over him something awful in the morning, straightening the collar on his shirt and ruffling up his hair even further. "The storylines are coming along so wonderfully," she said before they got into the car.

"You’re as supportive as a pair of flip flops," James told her, the scowl from the night before still lingering.

"You got yourself into this situation," she pointed out.

"You wouldn’t tell that boy who fell down a well to get himself out, would you?"

"Which boy is that?"

"The one Lassie helped." James batted her hands away from his hair. "Do I need to relay the request through Algernon?"

"Euphemia," Rita said as she swept up to them, placing an arm on Euphemia’s arm, "please don’t ruin the emotional tension of my show."

"I completely understand your point," Euphemia said, looking at James, "but also, if my son truly does need some solid interpersonal time with me, he will receive it immediately."
And there was the rub. He could have that interpersonal time, if he wanted. He really could get emotional support from a loved one. He could probably have even demanded some solo time with Remus, which would be much more tolerable than discussing it with his mum.

But it wasn’t like what they would have to say was a mystery. "Just choose a girl, James, and be done with it."

Knowing what he had to do, though, didn’t make it any easier. It wasn’t the same as knowing how.

Maybe his friends and family would have some ideas there. But at the end of the day, they would tell James it was his decision.

Well, his mates would.

Well, Remus would. Euphemia would tell him which one she preferred and insist he pick her. Sirius would choose whichever one he found less annoying and tell James to go with her. Only Remus would put it back on James because he was the one who treated James most like an adult.

Because James was an adult. He was twenty-eight, for fuck’s sake. If he couldn’t make a decision about a girlfriend, then what sort of man was he?

And besides, if James did choose Isabella, he did not want his mum and mates to know exactly how much he fancied Lily. That would make everything extremely awkward for Isabella after the show.

At least he had a reprieve today—visiting Bonnie’s home would be relatively stress-free. There was no pressure to impress her family since there was nothing but platonic chemistry between him and Bonnie. He’d been willing to proxy-purchase croissants for Lily, but falling for a French teacher was so beyond the pale, it was translucent.

French (and physics) teacher Bonnie Grogan lived in the city of Reading, not far from the castle or from London. With the full crew behind and ahead of them, she led James through the ruins of some abbey. She knew all about it, teacher that she was, but James had no mind for these sorts of details, and they didn’t linger in his mind for even a second. What mattered was she was passionate about local history, the local rock festival, and her dog that she’d brought with them, Baxter.

Baxter barely noticed James. This was fine since Algernon barely noticed Bonnie, and he also did not care if Bonnie’s dog liked him.

It did burn that Baxter kept bounding up to Rita, tail wagging, but it also proved that dogs were morons who didn’t know shit.

Bonnie’s Irish parents welcomed James into their home with an abundance of tea and biscuits that they insisted he eat even after several polite refusals. Her older brother went on about how Bonnie had always been an adventurer, traveling alone and with her Irish dance group to remote places, and how she’d been a true friend when he needed her.

When her mum asked how Bonnie was liking being on the show, James sat awkwardly on an ottoman while Bonnie tearfully confessed to shooting Helena in the eye. He froze when her brother came over and gave her a very long hug, and didn’t move an inch until Bonnie dried the last of her tears up and said otherwise the show had given her the chance to meet some very interesting people.

Her parents naturally looked to James at this statement, but then Bonnie went on to talk about Wendy and Lily and Isabella. James tried to not look put out.
He did, however, nod along fervently when Bonnie went on about how beautiful Isabella was, and how sweet, and how athletic. She even told them, voice wavering, about how Isabella had been such a dear after the trauma at paintball.

The visit ended up being a chance for Bonnie to catch up with her family, since any time her parents gave veiled inquiries about his intentions, Bonnie cut them off and told them about the ridiculous romance photoshoot or James’s picky cat. He couldn’t do more than send her a grateful look, but she did sneak a wink back at him when the camera was pointed elsewhere.

"Utterly dull," Rita proclaimed when she later joined James in the car. "Listening to radio static is more exciting."

Their car started driving away from Bonnie’s house toward the hotel, while another shuttled Bonnie back to the castle.

"I dunno," James replied cheerfully, "I quite like some static now and then."

"She’s a nice girl," Euphemia announced from behind him. "Not the one for James, of course, but then again so few are." She reached forward and ruffled his hair. "You know you don’t need static, dear."

"Euphemia," Rita warned.

"Oh, please. It’s not like I’m not ruining any tension. We both know Bonnie’s out this week since she and James have as much chemistry as two glasses of water."

"Actually," said the driver, "water has terrifically interesting chemical properties—"

Rita broke in, "I don’t pay you to speak, Gary. Shut up."

"Oi," said James, twisting around to face both women. "I never agreed to get rid of Bonnie."

"Please," Rita said, looking out the window.

Euphemia raised her gray eyebrows. "James, you’ve so many more reasonable things to argue about. Don’t die on this hill."

James spun back around and threw his back against the seat. "Not dying on any hill," he muttered. "Only idiots die on hills."

His mother laughed, but James didn’t. He could always renege on his deal and send Beatrice home. After all, she deserved it.

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When Rita, James, and Euphemia left the castle that morning—not to return for four whole days—a sense of indelible calm settled upon the inhabitants they left behind.

For Lily, their departure could not have come sooner.

Luckily, they left Algernon behind. He was the best one, anyway.

The last thing she felt prepared to do was see James Potter, hear his voice, talk or even think about him again until she absolutely had to. She had three days to get over her stupid crush until she was once again forced to spend time in his company, and she didn’t doubt her ability to do it. Lily had graduated from Cardiff with first-class honors despite losing her father in her second year. Getting
over a mere man was cake in comparison.

Especially if he stuck to his word and stopped gawking at her like an adorably dumbstruck fool whenever she said something clever.

The alternative was to stop saying clever things, and that was out of the question.

Yes, it had all seemed rather bleak in the dead of night, but fate threw Lily a bone in the form of a glorious lie-in, for nobody came to knock on the bedroom door and rouse the girls that morning. It seemed that the production crew might have been collectively holding their breath while they waited for Rita to leave, desperate to blow off some steam of their own.

Whether or not that was the case, Lily didn't get out of bed until after eleven, and found that the medicinal properties of a nice, long sleep were seemingly endless.

As they traipsed downstairs to breakfast, Bea asked her what she thought James and Bonnie would be getting up to in Reading.

"I'm initiating a blanket ban on that person's name starting now," Lily said cheerfully, "so I'd like you to zip it, please and thanks. Think you can handle that?"

"That depends," said Beatrice, smirking. "Can you say that without a chunk of croissant in your mouth, hypocrite?"

Lily took another bite and ignored her.

It would have been great to spend the day doing something productive instead of lazing around at the pool. Tragically, though, the girls were still being denied access to basic items like books and pens, Britain remained plagued by the longest and most oppressive heat wave Lily had ever witnessed, and though the telly in the girls' lounge had finally been switched on in Rita's absence, the only available media was a loop-through of the most recent season of *The Bachelor* from America.

That felt like a rather cruel jape.

The pool was their only viable option, which seemed to bother no one. The crew hadn't even bothered to fit the girls with microphones, relying solely on boom mics to catch any potential gossip, of which there would be none.

Or so Lily thought, until Isabella approached her shortly after lunch.

Lily was immersed up to her chest in the water, her crossed arms resting on the pool's edge, letting the sun warm her shoulders with her eyes closed and her mind on her mum's amazing fruit scones—which she had been promised in a text—when she felt a movement in the water beside her.

She opened her eyes and saw Isabella, who had sat down and placed her feet in the pool.

"Hi," said Isabella softly.

"Hi," Lily replied. "You okay?"

"I'm fine, I think." She paused, looking uncomfortable. "Can I talk to you about something?"

From a sun lounger, Beatrice lifted her sunglasses from her eyes and regarded them both curiously. It wasn't hard to guess what Isabella wanted to talk about.
Maybe, Lily reflected, she could slip beneath the water and drown herself to distract Isabella.

She decided against that as soon as it occurred to her. That was such a James thing to do, and she wouldn't stoop to that level.

The better option, surely, would be to slip beneath the water and pretend to drown. Fake her death, because she wasn't dramatic like him.

Instead, she said, "Sure."

Lily hauled herself out of the pool and sat next to her, very aware that Beatrice was definitely going to eavesdrop, and was at that minute edging further along her sun lounger so as to get as close as possible.

"I'm not sure how to begin," Isabella said. "It's a little awkward."

"I was prepared for awkward." Lily nudged her with her arm. "Shoot."

"It's just...I've been a little confused lately," she said, frowning down at the water that swirled around her slim, brown legs, "about...everything that's been happening, and I just think that if I knew—I know you've said there's nothing going on, but—but I can't help but feel like I'm not being told something."

That, Lily supposed, was fair. "Right."

"James said some odd things last night," Isabella continued, "about how he had to compliment you, and—"

"Beatrice bullied him into that," said Lily quickly.

"Yeah, I did," said Bea loudly, and both girls turned to look over their shoulders at her, "and I'm not apologizing for it." She nodded at Lily, her eyes on Isabella's face. "All I wanted was for Lily to get the appreciation she deserves. She's done a lot for him, you know."

"You have?" said Isabella, her brow furrowed.

Lily shrugged. "Bits and pieces." Like starting fights with him during fishing expeditions. Pretending to drown herself suddenly didn't seem like such a drastic idea. "It doesn't matter. What matters is that Bea shouldn't have interfered, and she'll apologize to him whether she wants to or not."

"I will not," Bea said. "You can't tell me what to do."

Lily raised an eyebrow at her.

"Well, okay, maybe you can," Beatrice allowed, "but it's not as if I put him through some great ordeal. You let him off the hook and he said nice things anyway."

"He told me he was only doing it because he had to," said Isabella dully, examining the flagstone paving beneath her palms.

Lily didn't know what was worse about hearing that from Isabella's mouth: the sudden, swooping feeling of guilt in her stomach, or the fact that it hurt, the same way it had hurt when James told her he only spoke to her because of Rita.

And then the third, outlying factor—the fact that once again, she cared enough about him to let
herself be hurt by anything he said or did at all.

"Wanker," murmured Beatrice.

"He's not a wanker," Lily heard herself saying, despite feeling rather inclined to cheer Beatrice on. She patted Isabella's hand. "I think he did want to say nice things, but only because he thinks I'm his friend, yeah? But he knew you were worried before, so he probably wanted to protect your feelings."

"He thinks you're his friend?" Isabella frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm not," said Lily simply. "Honestly, I doubt I'll see him again outside of the show. Not by choice, anyway," she added, thinking of Remus and Bea's romantic entanglement, and the inevitable, awkward encounter she would need to endure at some future social event. "Which is my fault, really, because you're right." She let out a sigh. "There is something you weren't being told, but it's not him, it's me. I'm the one who fancies him."

Isabella's eyes widened like those of a small, helpless animal in a trap. "Oh."

"So...yeah," Lily finished. "And honestly, you've got nothing to worry about. I told him last night because...because I dunno, I'm nuts, probably, and there's nothing happening. Nothing at all."

Lily could feel Beatrice itching to speak up and say something, but her friend stayed mercifully quiet. Even she had a limit, it seemed. Sweet, trusting Isabella wasn't nearly as easy to lampoon as James, who quite frankly might have deserved a little of what he'd been getting lately.

Isabella, meanwhile, had gone completely silent, staring out across the pool.

After half a minute, however, she turned to Lily and placed a hand on her arm, looking stricken.

"I'm so sorry," she said earnestly, her brown eyes imploring. "I've gone and made this worse."

Lily blinked at her. "What?"

"I knew I'd been a little unreasonable because...because this is a competition," she said, and looked as if she might cry, "but asking you to make me feel better when all along you've had these feelings—"

"They're not—no, honestly, it's really quite a recent thing—"

"If I've made things any harder or if I've hurt you, I'm so sorry—"

"You don't have to be sorry, I'm sorry—"

"You have absolutely nothing to be sorry about—"

"I feel like I went behind your back last night," Lily insisted, "and I hate that. I don't compete with other girls like that."

"Neither do I," Isabella said. "You're so wonderful, really—"

"You're wonderful."

"—and I can't bear to think that you're hurting over this."

"No, I'm not—I'm fine," said Lily firmly, covering the hand that laid upon her arm with her own.
"Really, truly fine. It’s not like I’m Miss Havisham in her wedding dress, wilting away on a chaise lounge because I lost the great love of my life. He's just a bloke. I'll be over it in a week."

Isabella let out a weak laugh. "You're so clever, the way you think of funny things to say like that. I don't think I could."

"Well, that’s…” Ironically, Lily now couldn't think of any pertinent response. "Thank you."

"I wish I could be as confident as you are," Isabella sighed, and let her hand slide from beneath Lily's, dropping it into her lap. "Nothing Helena said ever bothered you. You'd just laugh or make her look silly. I've never been able to be that way."

Lily looked at Beatrice, who shrugged.

Considering Isabella was not the rejected party, Lily was starting to get the distinct impression that she was in need of a lot more comforting than a casual viewer of the show might one day be led to believe.

"I mean, part of that is because Helena is literally quite bonkers and should never be taken seriously," Lily began, to which Isabella let out another whisper of a laugh. "But also, I think confidence is really something you have to work on, and a big part of that is not looking at other people and wishing you had what they've got, because, I mean, I personally know someone”—she wasn’t about to call out her sister on national television—"who spends her whole life doing that, and it makes her so bitter, and she's missed so many great things about herself, and obviously you're nothing like her, but you still have so many positives you could focus on instead."

"Yeah," piped up Beatrice. "Like, look at how you dealt with Bonnie last night. She was really upset because her family have been through an actual trauma, and you were the only person who managed to cheer her up."

"Which you couldn't have done," Lily added, "if you'd been as excited for paintball as Bea and I were, because you saw a problem with that kind of violence that we didn't, so there was no way that we could have related to Bonnie in the way that you did."

Isabella's eyes had brightened at the mention of how she'd helped Bonnie. "Do you think?"

"Oh my God, absolutely," said Lily.

"You really helped her," added Bea.

Lily nodded. "And it's totally okay to take some pride in that, because caring about other people is a massively underrated strength, and it's a lot more impressive than surface level stuff like making smart remarks to Helena."

"I didn't really think of it like that," said Isabella thoughtfully. "The paintballing, I mean. I felt like such a stick-in-the-mud at the time, like I was slowing everyone down, and James was so excited —"

"James probably gets excited by large sheets of bubble wrap. You shouldn't care what he thinks about your paintball preferences," said Lily flatly. "I'm glad you didn't play and it's not because I was sneakily trying to get him alone, or whatever, but because the alternative was you doing something you weren't comfortable with."

"Yeah, and no bloke is worth that," said Bea.
"There's a difference between taking an interest in your boyfriend's hobbies and flat-out doing something that goes against your values."

"I really wasn't comfortable with it," said Isabella sadly. "I hate violence, and I've never understood how people could do violent things for fun. It's different in films because you know it's all fake, but in reality, people can get really hurt."

"Helena did get hurt," said Lily, "which, retroactively, I would have laughed at the idea of, but it really wasn't funny."

"And Bonnie was so distraught," added Isabella.

"She'd still be upset if it weren't for you," said Beatrice, who had stood up, and joined them by the side of the pool. She sat down on the other side of Isabella and dangled her long legs in the water. "You did something good, yeah? So chin up."

"Yes, put your chin up and keep it there," Lily seconded, nudging her. "You are immensely caring and you know your principles and you're a kickass athlete, and they're all things to feel good about."

"Plus, you've got an awesome rack."

"Beatrice!" cried Isabella, giggling, her hands flying up to cover her cheeks.

"Well, it's true," said Bea. "And you put up with James all the time without losing your mind, which is admirable, considering most of the time I want to shout obscenities at him."

"Lily understands him better than I do, though."

"I'm not entirely sure if that's a good thing," said Lily, with a laugh that rang a little hollow. "What's the point in knowing a language that nobody else can speak? Plus, weren't we making a point to avoid boy talk today?"

"Well, I was going to," Bea said, "but you and Isabella just sat here and discussed the fact that you like the same bloke without exchanging one bitchy barb about it, so I figured I needed to toss the show a bone."

"This show is a graveyard of bones it didn't deserve—it doesn't need any more," Lily pointed out. "And, look, I know it's going to be a bit of a revolving door for the next four days, but while we have the castle to ourselves, why don't we just relax and enjoy ourselves, yeah? No talking about our one-on-ones, no talking about James, no boy talk at all. We can make a rule of it."

Beatrice grinned slyly. "Rita will hate that."

"That's the basis of its appeal," said Lily. "What d'you think, Bells?"

Isabella blinked at her. "Bells?"

"Yeah, like a nickname," said Lily, tossing a quick glance at Bea over her head. "If you don't like it —"

"No, I do like it," said Isabella, smiling properly for the first time since she'd joined them, "and I think no boy talk is a great idea."

"Girls are better, anyway," said Beatrice.
"Infinitely better," Lily seconded.

"So much better," said Isabella, "and speaking of relaxing...have either of you tried yoga?"

"No," said Lily, while Beatrice shook her head. "I've always wanted to try, though."

"Well, I can—I mean, I teach yoga, at my gym," she said, and then, with a bit more confidence. "It's my best class, actually, so I can teach you both if you want to learn."

"I mean...yes, obviously," said Lily.

"And I'm already super flexible," said Bea grandly, "so anything that lends itself to that is a big yes for me."

"There you go," said Lily, and Isabella beamed. "You've got two new students on board."

In the morning the car shuttled James to Oxford, where they’d sent Isabella to meet him.

He wrinkled his nose as the pretentious buildings passed by. He’d been here once before when he was a boy because his dad found it a completely charming town, and because his dad had deluded himself into thinking James would want to attend such a stodgy university. James was dead clever, but he didn’t hate himself.

Well, he hadn’t used to. He did hate himself a bit right now for being so stupid as to fancy two girls at once. Not that he’d intended to do that, but it was such an idiotic move that he wondered whether he could use this situation as reasonable grounds for a heart transplant.

The crew brought him to a boathouse by the river, sending James’s heart plummeting into his stomach.

They were really going to do this, weren’t they? They were putting him on the water again. Not just that, but they wanted him to take part in that stupid Oxford "tradition" that James had always thought looked straight up moronic.

When Rita approached him with a boater hat, James shook his head fervently.

"No," he said. "Absolutely not."

"It’ll look charming," she said in a teasing voice. "Don’t you want to look like a proper Oxford boy for Isabella?"

"That’d require a stick up my bum, so hard pass, thanks."

"Oh, but it’s adorable," his mum cooed, snatching the hat out of Rita’s hands and holding it out to James. "Here, just try it on, there’s a dear."

Five minutes later he stood stewing with that stupid fucking hat on, holding a wooden pole and debating how much damage he could do to the camera equipment with it before Rita tackled him into the river.

The upside to his dislike of Oxford and his hatred of hats—so insanitary!—was that it kept him from thinking about seeing Isabella again, now that Lily had confirmed that she did, in fact, fancy him.

The moment the other car pulled up, though, the whole debacle came crashing back down onto
"Er," he said when Isabella stepped out of the car, looking ravishing as always. "Ta da?"

Her hand flew up to her mouth, poorly muffling a small laugh. "Oh, James. Your hair is really not meant for hats, is it?"

"Not in the slightest," he announced. "Nor is my personality suited to this show or this town, but here we are!"

"Hey," she said playfully as she walked up in front of him. "I like Oxford."

"That I believe, but look at me." He stuck his hands out to the side, waving the pole. "You think I’m an Oxfordian?"

She leaned up and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "I think you can be whatever you want."

She was smiling broadly, staring up at him, and he remembered keenly why he’d liked her so much immediately. He never felt out of place next to her. He never felt unimportant.

"Have I mentioned that you are fantastically kind?" he said. "And gorgeous and also adept? Hopefully at punting because I’m about ninety percent sure we’re ending up in the river with me at the helm. Or the back, whatever that place is called."

She took hold of his hand and squeezed it. "I have faith in you."

Until he’d met Isabella, he hadn’t thought anyone could be this sweet and actually mean it.

Until he’d met Lily, of course, he’d never met anyone so willing to meet him on his level. But that was absolutely not what he needed to be thinking about now.

Someone from the boathouse provided him with a brief course on punting, but on land, not in the boat. Admittedly it sounded relatively straightforward: put pole in water, push on riverbed, glide forward. A two year old could understand the physics of it.

When he and Isabella were actually in the long, narrow boat, though, this advice fell apart. With his first push, intended to send them out onto the water toward the raft with the camera crew, he instead managed to spin them ninety degrees to the left, headed for the other shore.

"Ah, shit," he said, the first of many swear words.

Isabella kept calling out instructions to him, trying and failing to hide her fond smile. No matter what he did, though, they did not move in a smooth, straight line downriver. Thankfully the crew had blocked off a stretch from other tourists, or James would have been in approximately fifteen boating accidents in the first five minutes.

"Right," he said, ripping off his stupid hat with one hand. "I give up. Let’s get a rowboat. Rowing I know how to do."

"Oh, James, you’re doing fine!" she said, which was easy to say since she was sitting on one of the boat benches, not doing a thing with her gorgeous, lean arm muscles, shown off nicely by her tank top.

"I appreciate the encouragement, but this is really not going well at all." He debated throwing the hat toward her and demanding that she take over—surely she knew how to do this since she was
from here—but she hadn’t wanted to lead salsa dancing since it wasn’t proper or whatever. "D’you mind if we just float downriver instead and then hijack the camera boat to go back?" He paused. "Or we use the boat to make a break for freedom. I’m game either way."

Her smile slipped into something more uncertain, a portion of her bottom lip folding in between her teeth, a line appearing on her brow.

"I’m just joking," he added quickly. "We’re not making a run for it."

"No," she said, "it’s just…" She lightly touched two fingers to her mouth, then climbed to her feet with more grace than anyone should have had in this small of a boat. She held out her hand toward the pole. "I’ll punt."

He blinked. "You will?" He looked down at the pole in his hand. "I mean, brilliant! You definitely should."

After another moment’s hesitation, she took a few light steps on the boat to stand in front of him. "And the hat," she said decidedly. "I’d like to wear the hat."

"I’d also like you to wear the hat," he said, placing it on her head and handing her the pole.

Unsurprisingly, she was a much steadier hand at this than James had been. And he found he rather liked lounging on a boat, lazing down a river, watching Isabella’s strong arms guide him down the river.

He’d never seen her smile so brightly, or for so long.

"You look happy," he told her. "It’s nice."

"I feel happy," she said. "Is that strange to say?"

"Um, no. Not remotely."

"Good." She pushed off the riverbed again, and let the pole trail behind them in the water. "This show has been a bit much sometimes."

"That’s like saying the Thames is a bit polluted."

"I suppose. It’s only…it’s not been at all like I expected."

"No," James agreed. "It turned out way different than I thought, too."

"But in a good way, I think."

"Absolutely."

She turned pensive again, and didn’t speak until she’d punted a couple more times, taking them under some too-fancy bridges. At least the trees along the river were nice, normal, lovely trees, and not overly dressed up.

"I talked to Lily and Bea yesterday," she said thoughtfully.

James’s stomach twisted. "You did?"

It was easy to forget that, unlike him, the women had easy, constant access to each other. While he was a horse kept in a stable, they were all out in the corral together, plied with booze and boredom
to interact as often as possible.

"Yes," she said. "I love them both dearly."

"Oh, ah. Good."

She pulled the pole out of the water and rested the end in the boat next to her feet. "Lily told me she fancies you."

The lone thought that went through James’s mind was: Shiiiiit.

"It’s all right, though," Isabella added. "I can’t exactly fault her for it."

"I’m sorry," he blurted. "I should’ve told you first thing. She only told me the other night, I swear."

Isabella gave him such a soft look. "James, it’s fine, I promise." She picked up the pole and thrust it back into the water. "I admire her, actually. She knows what she wants, doesn’t she? And she’s...she’s not afraid to say it. Or act on it."

"You don’t even know the half of it." James cleared his throat. "I mean, you should’ve seen her at paintball when we were going after Beatrice."

"I remember at the photoshoot, when I came back into the room—you and Lily were up, and she told you you looked stupid—oh, don’t hate me, James, but you did look really silly—and I thought, I would never, ever say that."

"Well, of course not," James said with a frown. "You’re very different people."

"I know," she said, sounding a bit forlorn. "We really are."

From there she suddenly changed topics, going on about the history of the town, and how Cambridge did punting all wrong.

He didn’t much care about that, but he found he did care for this new well of confidence in Isabella, wherever it had come from. A niggling thought told him this was what Lily Evans could do for people, but he told it to shut up until two days’ time when he’d have to face her again.

For now, he owed Isabella the same attention she gave him.

Eventually they turned around and returned to the boat house, and from there to their separate cars because God forbid they ever have five minutes of unfilmed time together.

They reconvened outside a brick rowhouse, the cameras and crew all prepared to film them walking up to the door and meeting Isabella’s family.

He took hold of her hand. "Ready?"

After a noticeable pause, she said, "Yes," and led him to the door.

From there it was a frantic series of introductions: her parents Geeta and Dinesh both hugged him, while her brothers Christopher and Benjamin did the handshake-half-backslapping-hug thing with him. The men all looked terribly similar: tall, thin, and sleekly dressed in button-ups and trousers. Her mum’s brightly colored pudavai fit her short form perfectly.

She pinched his cheeks. "So handsome," she said. "Come in, come in. I made kozhukatta."
James inhaled sharply. Sweet, delicious, coconut dumplings were nothing to joke about. "I’m not going to lie," he told her, "one time I actually tried to trade my cousin’s cat for some. And I still stand by that exchange. It was fair."

She laughed and pushed him toward the kitchen.

They settled around the kitchen table, the dumplings and coffee already laid out and waiting. Isabella sat quietly next to him while her family kept lobbing questions and comments at him.

At some point James realized she hadn’t said a word since they’d come into the kitchen.

"So you’re the youngest?" he asked her.

She didn’t get a chance to reply, though, before her brother chimed in.

"Classic youngest, too," said Christopher. "Our parents always let Isabella do more than they let us at her age."

Benjamin—at least, James thought it was Benjamin—nodded. "One time I tried to watch a James Bond movie and Appa hid the remote for a week. Isabella, of course, was allowed to watch as many of them as she wanted."

"It kept her inside!" said Geeta. "Otherwise she was always running around the neighborhood, or off biking or swimming in the river. If James Bond kept her home, then that was what it took." She smiled at Isabella. "And of course she had the biggest crush on Sean Connery."

"Mum," Isabella said, hiding her face in her hands.

"Don’t worry," James whispered to her. "Only everyone in the country will know the terrible secret you share with half the female population."

She slid her hands down and smiled gratefully.

Geeta went on, "And who cared if she watched more television than the boys? She was never terribly good at school. Even when she was young, she always wanted to go play with the other children instead of learning."

"That’s why we encouraged her to pursue fitness," said Dinesh. "With obesity rates going the way they are, she’ll always have a job."

"Er, yeah." James scrubbed at his hair. "I s’pose that’s true enough. And she seems to like it, so."

"I do," Isabella assured him. "Teaching’s really lovely."

"And it keeps her looking very nice," Dinesh added, looking at James for confirmation.

"Oh, er." James cleared his throat, as though it were a completely normal and not at all creepy thing to talk to a father about how attractive his daughter was. "Yeah, you can tell she works out."

From James’s other side, Geeta placed her hand on his. "When we learned The Bachelor would be an Indian boy, we couldn’t believe it. And a Tamil one on top of it?"


"Yeah, er, who’d have thought?" James said awkwardly. "She was the first one I saw, you know. She came out of the limo before everyone and I just thought—wow."
Geeta nodded. "All that yoga is fantastic for a young woman."

"Uh, yeah. It’s good for everyone, I think." James sipped his coffee—this was the good Tamil stuff, not some instant Nestle crap. The only bright spot in this family visit thus far. He was going to ask Isabella something to engage her, but her mum beat him to it again.

"We’re so delighted Isabella has made it this far into the show. We were worried a white boy might not see her charms—you understand."

"Oh, she’s got charms," James said. "She’s the sweetest person I’ve ever met." He stopped, then shook his head. "I’m so sorry, Isabella, I keep talking like you’re not here and it’s incredibly rude and I’m an idiot." He made a point of shifting his chair to turn toward her and placed a hand on her shoulder. "You are the sweetest person I’ve ever met. And I talk a lot of shit but I am being completely serious here."

She gave him a weak smile, her hands wrapped tightly around her coffee mug.

He continued, "I did know from the first time we talked that you were really special and worthwhile. I don’t feel calm around a lot of people—no one, actually, except you. And I bet that’s why you’re such a great instructor because you make everyone feel comfortable and safe."

She ducked her head, smiling, and slid a hand sideways to squeeze his. "Thank you," she said. "That’s really kind."

Christopher elbowed her from her other side. "You’re so lucky to have met someone like him."

"And I’m lucky to have met her," James said, trying to soften the pointed tone he desperately wanted to use. "It’s really the fairer statement, actually, since you barely even know me."

Geeta laughed. "But of course we know who you are," she said. "You’re James Potter. We all use your family’s hair products—no one else in England makes anything half as good at conditioning Indian hair."

"Yeah, but like...you don’t even know where I went to uni or anything. I could be a homeless drunk for all you know."

"You work for your father’s company, yes? We’re shareholders."

"Oh." Despite being seated, he felt utterly flat-footed. "I mean, yes, I do. For now."

Dinesh nodded knowingly. "How can we not approve of an Indian boy who works in his family’s successful business?"

"Right, but—" James only stopped because he caught sight of Isabella’s pleading eyes. It hurt to shove his arguments back down his throat, but this was about Isabella, not about being right. "Isabella and I are both lucky," he said briskly, and looked at Benjamin across the table. "So you’re an actuary like your parents, eh?"

It was maddening to sit there and let them talk passive aggressive shit about their own daughter. And it wasn’t like she was some murdering psychopath—she was a lovely, empathetic person who just wanted to teach people yoga!

Eventually—much too late, in James’s opinion—Rita announced they had what they needed for footage. Which was, of course, all that mattered here. Not that James get to know her family, or more importantly, scold them for such reprehensible behavior. No. All that mattered was the
footage they could puzzle together into a super dramatic narrative not at all resembling real life.

Rita started guiding him toward the door, but James couldn’t leave things like this with Isabella—he wouldn’t see her for three more days after this, and he was not letting everything that just unfolded stand uncommented on.

"Oh, hey," he told Isabella. "You said your parents were taking care of your cats, yeah? Can I meet them?"

Rita sniffed. "We had to wrangle them into her bedroom. They kept chewing on the camera cords, the menaces."

"I was talking to Isabella," James said firmly without even a glance at Rita. "So?"

"Oh, yeah. Of course." Isabella had a distant look about her, like she wasn’t even in this house mentally. He couldn’t blame her. "This way."

James, Rita, and Bozo followed her down a corridor, while Euphemia stayed behind with the other camerapeople and Isabella’s family. Even if she hadn’t lived there in years, and even with a troupe of chaperones on their heels, it felt vaguely illicit to go to a girl’s bedroom in her parents’ house.

Isabella opened a door with a pink paper heart on it reading *Isabella Marks* in loopy cursive. The color scheme continued inside, with rose-colored walls and a light pink duvet, on top of which three calico cats lay sprawled out in different directions.

"Make room, please," Isabella cooed to them. She picked one up and sat down in its place, settling the cat on her lap. "I’m sorry they’re a bit boring right now. This is their nap time."

"Oh, no, please don’t apologize for your cats. Trust me. I know you have zero control over them." James perched on the edge of the bed, reaching out a tentative hand toward the cat nearest him. "Besides, no cat is boring." At the touch of his fingers on the cat’s side, the cat purred and curled closer to James. "What are their names?"

"Oh, um." She looked away quickly, her cheeks flushing. "It’s silly. I named them when I was a teenager."

"Unless you burdened them with dog names like Champ or Rover, I think you’re in the clear."

"Right. Um." She hugged the cat on her lap. "They’re Jasper, Cullen, and Emmett," she said, so quickly that James nearly didn’t catch them.

He looked at her strangely. "What’s silly about those names? They sound perfectly normal to me."

She watched him warily for a second, and then let out a breath. "Nothing. They just sound a bit...human."

"You remember my cat’s named Algernon, yeah? Not exactly an animal name."

"Well, except the mouse."

"The what?"

"The mouse? In the short story?"

"What short story?"
She shook her head rapidly. "Never mind. I’m probably getting confused. My parents are right—I was never very good in school," she said, focusing on petting the cat in her lap.

The one-eighty from the earlier punting woman tore at James’s heart.

Her bloody parents. They didn’t deserve such a wonderful daughter. But he could hardly go saying that now, could he, not if he might still end up with Isabella at the end? Calling them a rotten bag of dicks would be a somewhat less than ideal start to his relationship with them. And even if he didn’t end up with her, Isabella clearly didn’t want him to say anything.

"Look," James began. "I can’t say everything I want about your family right now because of obvious reasons." He glanced toward the camera. "But please believe me: I think you’re amazing. I think you’re plenty clever and strong and any bloke would be lucky to know you. I’m lucky to know you."

She shook her head lightly. "You don’t have to make up for anything, James. I’m all right. Sometimes I’m just too sensitive, but I’ll get over it."

"No, you’re not. Getting hurt when other people insult you doesn’t make you too sensitive. It makes the insulting person a dick."

"James," she said, her tone verging on warning.

He shoved a hand through his hair. "I’m sorry but it’s true."

"They’re my family." She stroked behind her cat’s ear. "They want what’s best for me."

She clearly did not have her heart in that last sentence, but there were cameras on them. What could she possibly say?

He shouldn’t have even put her in this situation, making her talk about it like this in front of Rita and Bozo.

"Right, well." He gave the cat in front of him one last pet. "I’ll just say then that your empathy is seriously one of the best things about you, yeah?"

Isabella tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, still looking down. "That’s what Lily said."

"Well, good! Listen to both of us, then. It’s great and you should be proud that you’re not a lout like me who says stupid shit all the time that I then have to apologize for. Like this, how I shouldn’t have—well. I think you know."

She finally brought her eyes up to him, the corners of her lips twitching up despite the melancholy in her large brown eyes. "Thank you, James. I get what you’re trying to say and we don’t—we can go now. All right?"

He stood up and offered a hand out to her. "Yeah. Let’s get out of here."

"I can play arpeggios," said Sirius on day three.

Lily paused in the act of teasing Algernon—who had come to rest atop the piano and listen to her practice, swishing his tail whenever she played something particularly pleasing—and looked up at Sirius.

"Good for you," she said flatly. "Sadly, I'm fresh out of 'you tried' stickers."
Sirius held a hand to his chest. "A dagger in my heart, Evans. Right in the aortic valve."

"You're interrupting my alone time," Lily informed him. "Why?"

Her precious, unmonitored, unrecorded alone time, she did not add. Isabella was swimming outside, Bonnie had barricaded herself in her bedroom with a headache, and Beatrice was away on her date, so it had been decided that there was no point in filming Lily by herself.

"You aren't alone—you're with Algernon."

"Algernon transcends the company of other humans."

"Personally, I'm more of a dog person, but Algernon is the exception," Sirius agreed, and dropped down onto the bench next to her. He tapped out an aimless, discordant melody with his left hand. "Can't say I've ever seen him take to anyone like he has to you, though."

"He's got excellent taste."

"Unlike his owner," Sirius grumbled, with unexpected and unwarranted bitterness. "Isabella Marks, honestly. I live with James. How am I supposed to put up with her when all this is over?"

He said it with the air of a man preparing to face-off against a shit-clogged toilet, as if James's romantic decisions had anything whatsoever to do with him, as if Isabella Marks weren't a better woman than any man could have hoped for.

"If you're too thick to see the appeal in a person who is good and talented and beautiful," said Lily, her tone cold, "you're beyond help, and I can't and won't explain it to you. Generally, though, a good strategy to employ when you don't like your best mate's girlfriend is to shut up and deal with it."

"I won't apologize because James deserves the best and my approval is hard won."

"It's not me you need to apologize to."

"Besides, shouldn't you be lambasting Marks right now?" He continued to plink away one-handed. "She's the reason you got rejected."

Lily debated slamming the piano lid down on his elegant, waxy white fingers.

She didn't know Sirius particularly well. Her one meaningful interaction with him had not exactly been a meeting of minds, but he had a sly, malevolent air about him at the best of times, the air of a man who took pleasure in the pains and follies of others.

"Schadenfreude gives you a boner, does it?" she remarked, lifting her hand to scratch Algernon behind the ear.

Sirius laughed. "Perceptive even in despair, I see."

"You've got a slim handle on the meaning of the word 'despair,' if you think I'm toppled by a little rejection," she said. "I tend to reserve that kind of thing for, you know, Brexit, or the continued existence of Nazis, or the fact that I haven't been allowed to pick up a book since I set foot in this castle."

"I admire the brave face you're putting on, but you can be straight with me." He nudged her shoulder with his own. "I'm quite the confidant."
"Deluded, too. Well done."

"It must really sting to know you'll never get a chance to reenact your many sex dreams."

"Like walking into a hornet's nest," she dryly intoned, rolling her eyes for Algernon's benefit.

"Exactly, Evans. It's cathartic to let it all out, and I, for one, would gladly offer to listen if you were interested in sharing the details of said dreams..."

"Oh, sure, it's not remotely inappropriate of you to ask." She shot him a tight smile. "I'll tell you my favorite, shall I?"

"I'm all ears."

"Oh, you should be. It's so hot—basically, we live in the same house, and he does his share of the chores without needing to be asked."

Sirius threw back his head and laughed, so loudly that Algernon jerked from his comfortable position and let out a disgruntled yowl.

"Brilliant," he said, and clapped her on the back. "You are top notch entertainment, Evans."

"I'm glad one of us is," she replied. "I'd like you to leave now, please."

He rose to his feet, leaned forward, and gave Algernon's fur a casual ruffle. "Certainly, if my company offends you so."

"Less offended, more bored," she said, with a dismissive wave. "Try to be interesting next time."

He laughed again, finally moving away from her.

"I'm disappointed in you, Evans," he said loudly, as he strolled towards the open patio doors. "Coldly turning me away, just as things are about to get fun."

Later that night, while she, Bonnie and Isabella were eating dinner, Sirius sauntered into the dining room, stopped by Lily's elbow and dropped a dog-eared copy of Anna Karenina on the table.

"Contraband," he said, then left the room with his hands in his pockets.

Lily took that to mean she'd won his approval.

When they returned to the hotel for the night, Isabella sent safely back to the castle, James gave Rita the finger and grabbed his mum's arm.

"Come on," he said. "I need emotional support. Not about who I fancy," he added to Rita. "Just other stuff."

Rita rolled her eyes and dug out her hotel key, heading for the stairs. "I need a drink," she said, as though this were any sort of sequitur.

"Come, darling." Euphemia gently removed his hand from her arm. "They've a lovely back garden, and I called ahead for two mojitos."

He checked to make sure that Rita was almost out of sight, and then started his tirade while they walked to the garden.
"Can you believe them?" he told Euphemia. "Honestly. Honestly. Treating their own daughter like she’s a slab of bacon to be given to the first decent man who comes by. And basically telling her she’s stupid and only good for her looks—and just ignoring her, why would they—" By now they were outside on the patio, where only a few other patrons sat at distant tables. He turned to his mum and asked in a wrenching voice, "Why would they do that?"

A waiter carrying a tray of filled glasses stopped at their side to hand them their drinks, then headed for the other guests. Euphemia took a long draw of her drink, swirled it around until the ice cubes clinked against the sides, and then began strolling toward a bench next to a fountain.

"I do hate to say it, dear, but you know why."

"No," he said stubbornly. "I don’t. You’re the parent—explain it to me."

She didn’t reply, not until they’d sat down on the bench. "Take a sip," she told him. Once he had, she continued, "You do know the answer, but dear that you are, you want it to be more complicated than it is." She patted his knee with her free hand. "Geeta and Dinesh are bad parents. They don’t understand how to emotionally support their daughter. And because they are bad people, they seem to delight in her discomfort and shame."

James scuffed his shoe against the grass, wishing he had a wall or something sturdier to let his anger out on. "It’s not fair," he said. "She’s so bloody nice. Her parents are awful, and her brothers aren’t any help, and she doesn’t—she doesn’t deserve that."

"She didn’t choose her family. No one does, unfortunately."

He let his head fall sideways to rest on her shoulder. "I want to help her. I want to make sure she doesn’t see them again."

"Is that what she wants?"

"I dunno, why would she not want to—" He paused, and took a gulp of mojito. "Ugh. I just remembered she goes home every week for dinner."

"I recall," Euphemia said sadly.

"Why would she do that to herself? I mean, Sirius left his shit family. She could, too."

"You’ve been extremely fortunate in your family, James. Sirius could have left earlier, but why do you suppose he didn’t?"

"Because he hadn’t thought of it? I dunno."

"Because when your family is like that, you somehow, inexplicably, keep hoping they’ll change. Because they are family and they should treat you well and surely they’ll learn and get better."

"But they don’t."

"No. They often don’t." Euphemia looked into the distance, eyes unfocused. After a moment, she patted James’s head. "Sometimes they do, though."

It wasn’t fair that Isabella’s family kept shredding her self-esteem. But his mum was right—it wasn’t James’s problem to fix. Isabella was an adult and could make her own choices.

Unless he did end up with her. Which was still possible, certainly. She still seemed to fancy him,
and he did like being around her.

That, and he had a horrific premonition of her face if he gave the final rose to Lily.

He sat up and twisted to give his mum an awkward bench hug. "Thanks for being you," he told her.

She squeezed him back. "Thanks for being you, dear. We are quite the matched set."

The dawn of another day brought yet another date and family visit, this time with the traitor Beatrice Booth, who met him at a tree-lined walkway in Milton Keynes.

She bounced over to him with the energy of an antelope as soon as she saw him, grinning all over her face as if she hadn't spent the past week causing undue trouble for a lot of people.

"Lily says I have to apologize to you for reneging on our deal and pressuring you to admit to things that 'aren't true,'" she said, complete with finger quotes, "to suit my nefarious needs, and I suppose I am genuinely sorry for most of that, so I really would appreciate it if you'd forgive me."

Every fiber of James's being told him to reject her apology—the woman had zero code of ethics, after all—but the cameras were on them. Rita was watching greedily over Bozo's shoulder.

He couldn't be the cad who refused to forgive one of the girls on camera.

"Apology accepted," he said tightly.

"Great," said Beatrice. "She also said you have to apologize to me for asking me to keep secrets from my best friend."

James stared at her.

"She says it's not a request, and she expects better from both of us than to hold grudges like children," Beatrice added. "Plus, she's the one who suggested our activity for today to the producers, so you owe her a solid in advance."

"I can hold a grudge if I like," he muttered, crossing his arms.

But Beatrice had apologized, and she'd meant it, and it really wasn't on that he'd asked Beatrice to hide something from Lily.

"Fine," he said haughtily. "I'm sorry I asked you to lie by omission, even though you definitely didn't."

"Look at that, our wounds have been mended," said Bea, smirking at his reluctance.

Despite the grudge he was totally holding against Beatrice for being a devious fiend who had made his life extremely difficult, he proceeded to have a thoroughly nice day with her and her family. It helped that the activity Lily had arranged, through a production team and with Rita's approval, was a trip to a pirate-themed miniature golf course. It had fake pirate ships and everything, and James took great pleasure in using his extensive knowledge of pirate slang with Beatrice, who laughed like a loon every time.

Best of all, Beatrice made it through eighteen holes of golf without giving him any shit about Lily. This spared him any further on-camera embarrassment on the topic, much to his delight and to Rita's chagrin, which only delighted him more.
In fact, save for her pre-golf comments, Bea didn't mention Lily at all. She seemed more interested in the game, and in comparing their trash-talk techniques, and laughing about how mini-golf was a much better activity than showing James around each and every one of Milton Keynes's 130 roundabouts—the most of any city in Britain, he learned.

This lack of Lily talk, James told himself, was a good thing. He definitely hadn't been wondering how Lily was doing back at the castle, and he definitely wasn't itching to ask.

After mini golf, James met Bea's family at the gorgeous converted farmhouse they called home. Abutting their house was her parents' bakery which, he learned, was something of a favorite with the locals.

Beatrice Booth had actually *grown up* in a bakery. No wonder she had such a positive outlook on life.

After Bea introduced him to her family—her parents Maite and Colin, her older brother Aaron, and her younger sister Miriam—she loudly announced that she and James were just mates. This was all right, in James’s book, because it meant her family wouldn’t feel compelled to ask him about his intentions or anything. Then she immediately undercut any fondness he felt by adding that she couldn't be less attracted to him if he were a slug slithering across the ground after a heavy rainfall.

"Not that you're unattractive," she assured him, and landed a punch on his upper arm, "but different horses for different courses, and all that."

It was so rude of her to bring up horses after the tragic ordeal James had suffered on Dolores.

At least Bea's family was a laugh, especially her twelve-year-old sister, who was profoundly deaf but could speak and sign. She kept running in and out of the room to model what appeared to be a vast collection of cat-patterned pajamas, all of which made James's face light up. Miriam even taught him how to sign rude words until Rita cottoned on and put a stop to it, but not before James had garnered quite the repertoire.

The whole family was football mad, particularly Bea's brother, who played for a league two team and seemed to like James more for not being overtly interested in his sister. Maite, who still had a strong Spanish accent despite living in England for more than thirty years, set James to work in the kitchen with a Pan Rustico recipe she said had never failed to yield excellent results.

To his immense pleasure, baking bread turned out to be both very fun and also a hidden talent of his.

"It's got a lovely crust," said Maite, once his loaf had come out of the oven and cooled, examining his offering as if she were Paul Hollywood. "Good density, and the structure is very good. Yes."

She gave James an encouraging pat on the back. "You can show your face around here again."

Even Beatrice stopped by the oven to have a taste and compliment the finished product.

"You should invite him for Halloween," said Bea to her parents, her mouth full of freshly-baked bread. "Him and his mates. We have a big, blowout party every year," she added, for James's benefit. "You can try your hand at spooky cakes. Bring Isabella with you."

All in all, visiting Booth's family was a more chilled out experience than he had expected. James returned to the next hotel that evening feeling as if he'd spent a perfectly normal day—save the ever-present cameras—with a friend.

A friend who was probably still scheming to make him pick her new best friend.
But still. A friend.

Isabella rapped softly on Lily's door on the morning of her trip to Cokeworth. She smiled when Lily answered, already dressed in her yoga gear.

"I've been awake for hours," Isabella told her, indicating her clothes and her freshly washed hair. "I think Bonnie's still asleep but I don't want to wake her. Would you like to have breakfast together?"

If Isabella had been a different kind of woman, Lily might have suspected that her invitation was a subtle "hands off my man, keep me in mind and feel guilty" attempt.

But Isabella wasn't that kind of woman. She'd get jealous, yes, but she was brave and truthful enough to be open about it.

"Sure," said Lily with a smile, and stepped out of her room, holding the door open for Algernon to leave before she closed it gently behind her.

Algernon had spent every night since James left sleeping in Lily’s bedroom. There had been a bit of a scare on day two when he could not be located for several hours, but Lily eventually found him scratching at the door in what transpired to be James’s room, where some idiot member of the production team had shut him in.

This was inexcusable, but it did give Lily the chance to snoop around that part of the castle. With a little direction from Peter, Lily was able to find Rita’s bedroom and have a nose. Typically, it was the most luxurious room on the floor, and the odious cow had an air conditioner to herself. Even James had been stuck with a musty old room and a crappy fan.

Algernon, of course, had immediately sicked up under Rita’s bed, which Lily recognized as an act of solidarity and revenge.

"How are you feeling about your date today?" said Isabella, when they were almost at the bottom of the long, creaky, spiraling staircase which led directly to the ground floor hall. "Nervous?"

So much for no boy talk.

"Um," Lily replied, "not really, I don't think."

Isabella made a small humming noise beneath her breath. "I'm always nervous on our dates."

"I suppose I might be nervous if it was a real date and I didn't already know that it wasn't going anywhere, but it's not, is it? It's visiting my mum with...well, with your boyfriend, I guess."

"James is not my boyfriend—I mean, not yet, or not—" Isabella began, then she sighed, her shoulders dropping with apparent defeat. "This is a competition, not real life. Don't let that worry you."

"I'm not worried—"

"I'd feel terrible if I thought you couldn't enjoy yourself because of me," she continued. "So please, just enjoy your day and don't think about it."

They reached the end of the staircase and Lily followed her into the kitchen, already feeling the itchy, suffocating effects of yet another swelteringly hot morning.

"We're going to my favorite park," she told Isabella, pausing beside the fridge, "and I'll get to see
my mum, so I'm not worried that I won't enjoy myself."

Then she opened the fridge door and backed into it, arse first, which Isabella may have found odd, perhaps, if she hadn't seen Lily do it every morning since they'd first arrived at the castle.

"You really don't like the heat, don't you?" Isabella remarked.

Lily closed her eyes, focusing her attention on the cold air against her back, rather than her warm face. "I don't hate it as much as I hate Rita, but it's a close race."

"It really has been unusually hot, especially for England."

"It's all the hellfire that surrounds us daily," said Lily, then opened her eyes, a sudden thought occurring to her. "Did Bonnie's fan ever get replaced? Or is she just using yours, now that you're sharing?"

Isabella didn't answer right away, but picked up an apple from the fruit bowl on the counter and held it close to her navel, staring at the wall as if she was in a daze.

Now that Lily thought of it, she seemed a little out of sorts.

"She got another," Isabella said, shifting the apple from one hand to the other, "and I let her use mine. She really—she hates the heat, too."

"Figures she would."

"Hmm?"

"We're both Irish," Lily explained. "Or half-Irish, in my case. Our bodies aren't made for these Sub-Saharan conditions."

"Oh," said Isabella. "Of course."

Lily had believed that their heart-to-heart by the pool had resolved most of Isabella's worries, because she'd been chipper on the day before her visit to Oxford, but all of that optimism appeared to have fled the scene completely. She seemed rather flat—shoulders drooping, punctuating silences with wispy little sighs—as if something had happened between then and now to knock the wind out of her sails.

"Hey," Lily said gently, "I never asked you how your date went."

Isabella stilled, the apple clenched in her hand like a shiny red grenade.

"If you don't want to tell me—"

"No, it's fine. It was nice," Isabella replied, with a lilt of enthusiasm that sounded rather forced. "My family really liked James, and we went punting." A small smile formed on her face. "Rita made him wear a boater hat, but he didn't seem to like that very much."

"Oh, right, because hats are insanitary," said Lily dryly.

"They are?"

"Well, probably, but I don't—it's just some silly thing he said once."

"During paintball?"
"No." Lily stepped away from the fridge and nudged the door shut with her elbow, a new kind of heat stealing across her face. She shouldn't have been able to quote him with such thoughtless ease, but she was pathetic because she could. "The night Wendy left."

"Right," said Isabella. "He didn’t mention that. About hats, I mean."

"Probably because it sounds ridiculous."

"And you—are you still sure that you don't want to be friends with him, once this is all over?"

"With who?" said Lily. "Bozo?"

A woman with Beatrice's moxie would have told Lily to stop being cheeky, but Isabella didn't have Bea's moxie. She dropped the apple into the fruit bowl without having taken a single bite, wringing her hands in front of her.

"I just—" Isabella began. "I just think James would be terribly upset if he thought you didn’t want to see him ever again."

"I really don't think he'd care, Bells."

"Oh, he would, I'm sure!" Isabella's brown eyes were all sincerity. "You get along so well, and he said you had a great time at paintball and you were laughing so much together at dance class..."

"I also get along well with my postman, but it's not like we hang out at weekends."

"But—but I just keep thinking about how you said you weren't friends."

"Because we're not friends."

"But he thinks you are," Isabella lamented, "and it makes sense because you're so clever and funny and—I mean, I think the only reason I was jealous is because you two seem so..." She let out a heavy breath. "I mean, compared to me—"

"Isabella, it's fine," said Lily pointedly, not of any mind to learn where that sentence was leading her.

"It's not fine, not if I'm somehow coming between you."

"It's really big of you to say this, honestly, and I really appreciate it, but James Potter is more than able to live without me." Lily smiled. "He's got you."

"It was big of Isabella to say it."

Lily wouldn't have.

She wasn’t a jealous woman by any means, but she couldn’t claim to be so free of insecurities that she would have urged a woman who openly fancied her boyfriend to spend more time with him, particularly within the framework of a "romantic" date at a park.

Then again, she wouldn't have beaten herself up over a little bit of jealousy in the first place, or at least not to such an extent. Lily had found Isabella's earlier behavior bothersome, but not so much that Isabella ought have felt a pressing need to push her onto James in a fit of selfless remorse.

"It's just... I don't want anyone to be hurt because of me," Isabella sighed, letting her arms fall to her sides. "Not James, not you, and not—not anybody."
"Nobody will," Lily assured her. "Not a chance of it, okay?"

Isabella sent her a weak, worryingly insincere smile. "Okay."

The morning of the last hometown visit, James awoke jittery. His leg bounced so much at breakfast that after the third time he knocked the table, his mum grabbed his barely-touched coffee and downed it in one go.

"You don’t need it," she told him. "Stop worrying. I think you’ll have fun today."

"Fun is one word for it," he mused. "Facing agonizing decisions is another."

"That’s three words, dear. Don’t do such poor maths in front of Lily or she’ll lose interest."

James, who had resumed putting jam on his toast, shoved a corner into his mouth and chewed sullenly.

Three days apart from Lily had not provided any real clarity on the situation. The situation where, miraculously—most improbably—Lily fancied him.

This was fine, he told himself. It was good. Completely flattering, actually, considering she was incredible.

The other half of the situation, of course, was that he fancied her back.

Some.

A bit.

Fine, a lot. But that wasn’t the only thing going on. If he could have just had a few days to think about this instead of constantly being shoved in front of cameras, if he could just talk things through with Remus—

He grimaced. If he could just talk to Lily, actually, that would be perfect. She would tell him what to do and wouldn’t hold back remotely. But that wasn’t an option for at least another few days, when he could invite her into the camera-free fantasy suite.

That would be absolutely what Lily would be expecting, wouldn’t it: hey, Lily, come join me in this fantasy suite and help me resolve my romantic dilemmas on this rose-petal-strewn bed while Marvin Gaye plays in the background…

He’d just play it cool today. Not cold, like at paintball. Just...himself. She didn’t want him to do anything else, it seemed.

Himself. He could totally be himself. During whatever random "adventure" they were sending him on today, which as usual remained a surprise until he arrived.

Today, however, even arriving somewhere didn’t make it clear what was on the agenda.

"Bradgate Park?" he asked his mum after they drove past the gates. "I don’t much fancy blokes named Brad."

"Oh, for heaven’s sake, James," his mum told him. "Nerves don’t excuse stupidity."

He sank down in his seat, refusing to dignify that with a response. Soon the car stopped in front of
the visitor center, where Lily and the cameras were waiting outside.

"Relax, dear," Euphemia added as she climbed out of the car. "Enjoy yourself."

James rolled his eyes and followed her out of the car. Bozo was already filming, even as James walked up to Lily. It was hard not to smile when he saw her, especially not when she stood there with her feet firmly planted, her arms crossed, taking up space and daring someone to tell her otherwise.

Those pesky nerves wriggled in his stomach.

"Ah, good morning," he said. "I assume this is not exactly where you grew up."

Lily looked up at him, blinking a little in the sunlight that beat directly down upon her face. "Of course it was. I'm actually a cunningly disguised doe, and you've the deductive skills of a small child."

Fuck. Her mocking of his pathetic efforts should really not have made him fancy her more.

*She fancies you back,* a bothersome corner of his mind whispered.

As if he’d forgotten. Idiot corner.

"Right, er. Fair enough." He glanced over her shoulder at his mum. "I’ve been instructed to ‘have fun’ and ‘enjoy myself.’ Did you get the same mandates?"

"Um, no," she said, sweeping a hand down to indicate her clothes. "I was instructed to dress sexy, so I didn't."

James still thought she looked very fetching in her jean shorts and t-shirt, but that was hardly how he needed to start, by telling her she had failed and was still sexy.

"Sounds about right," he said, his foot just barely tapping against the pavement. "Did you at least get to bring sunscreen today?"

"I did. Put it on already. Wanted to bring Algernon too—he's been sleeping in my bed the past few nights and I think he's missing you—but they said no."

His mum raised her eyebrows at him from behind the camera, as if to say, *really, you're asking about sunscreen?*

He cleared his throat. "I don’t think this is the scintillating conversation starter they were hoping for," he said, nodding at the crew, "but, you know. I, ah, didn’t want a repeat of our fish-killing expedition. You were pink for days."

"Personally, I don't give a shit what they want," said Lily, direct as always. "I suppose they were hoping I'd be all resentful and pouty toward you after our last talk, but I'm not, and I have no immediate plans to yell at you."

"Oh, cool." He tried to still his bouncing leg. "That’s how I like all my dates to start, honestly: with the woman telling me she has no *immediate* plans to yell at you. She might later, of course, but she won’t right off the bat, so that’s all right." He took a quick look around. "So, er, we’re supposed to do something, I’m guessing?"

Lily explained that they’d be viewing the deer who lived in the park. Although this wasn’t as
excellent as pirate-themed mini-golf, it certainly ranked better than wandering around some boring abbey ruins.

The visitor center staff provided instructions about not being aggressive toward the animals or getting too close. Notably they didn’t say James couldn’t try to ride a deer, but he had a feeling it was implied.

With their warnings ringing in their ears, James, Lily, and their entourage set out along a walking path into the deer park.

Soon the visitor center fell out of sight, leaving them surrounded by grassy, open fields interspersed with patches of dense woods. A few spectacular deer stood on top of a distant hill, their broad antlers profiled against the sky.

Neither he nor Lily had really spoken since they’d entered the protected part of the park. She was probably regretting telling him she had feelings for him.

"This is already so much nicer than fishing," James said to fill the silence. "Wish we could feed the deer, though. That’d be better yet." He rubbed his neck, and when Lily didn’t immediately jump in with a response, he went on, "Although that’s not a fair comparison to fishing, then, is it? Maybe I’d be more into fishing too if I got to feed the fish instead of jabbing them with sharp objects."

"You can feed fish at a pet shop for the low, low price of...whatever a goldfish costs these days," said Lily, glancing sideways at him. "I'm not sure. I think I got one for 50p when I was a child, but you've got to account for inflation."

"Yeah, but a fish in a tank is a responsibility. A fish in a lake eating a worm I gave him is...well. Fun is really stretching it, but it’s better than trying to...whatever the opposite of drowning is."

If he weren’t intimately familiar with the muffled sound of his mum’s laughter, he might not have heard it from behind them.

Brilliant. He was definitely impressing the girl he fancied. Who also fancied him.

That still didn’t seem possible.

Lily laughed. "I feel like I lost you about halfway through that sentence. Are you referring to drowning the fish, or drowning yourself? If it's the former, I really don't think that's possible."

Well, if you were in hell, keep going, right?

Even if hell was taking place in a serene environment with a perfect, cooling breeze.

"No, like—what is it if you take a fish out of water and it dies from the air? Suffocating? That doesn’t sound right."

"I think it's asphyxiation, right, because they use their gills to make oxygen, and—" She stopped walking and frowned up at him. "Why are we talking about this?"

He stood next to her. "Er." He looked around, as if the deer might suddenly leap forward and distract him from having to explain that he was weirdly more nervous now that he knew she fancied him. "I could ask if you also brought mosquito spray?"

"No, thank you, I know you're more than capable of better, and will attribute any failure to think of an interesting conversation topic to a lack of effort on your part."
He took a moment to handle the wave of attraction that crashed over him.

She really, really expected his best. As she should.

Any other day.

"Well, ah," he said, mind scrambling. It seized on an idea and he ran with it. "You’re the contestant here, right? Maybe I should hold you to a higher standard. What fascinating conversation topic do you have on the tip of your tongue?"

There. Problem solved.

"Contestant," she repeated, with a dry, amused laugh. "Let's just skate past the fact that I'm sure as hell not competing for any man, and talk about what you're doing to recommend yourself to us, because I have many suggestions to fix that lack of balance."

They both started walking again, approaching some other stone ruins by the side of the path. England was littered with ruins, most of them terribly uninteresting, in James’s opinion. The deer that had come a little closer held a lot more interest.

The woman at his side, though, held the most.

"I’m just saying," he went on, more comfortable now that he had a surprisingly solid argument, "that you were the one who’s all, oh, James, be wittier, be funnier—am I not allowed to ask the same of you?"

"You could, if I was falling short, but I'm not the one who brought up fish, then defected to mosquito spray when that well dried up."

"If you’ve got a problem with the topic, you can fix it, too, you know. I’m arguing for equality here."

"Oh, well if it's for equality…" She skipped a couple of steps ahead of him and turned around, walking backwards, fixing him with an inquisitive stare. "I'll go big or go home. What's your life story?"

He grinned at her. Going big was right up his alley, next to Cat Education Station and Moderately Impressive Football Tricks, Incorporated.

He took a few moments to gather his thoughts.

"Right. Well, in the beginning," he intoned, "I was, like other humans, born from a woman. Only my mum was of an advanced maternal age when she had me, which is a rude term doctors use for anyone who’s basically not a teenager, it seems. You see, she and my dad had been waiting for me for quite some time—years, actually, years of desperately trying to conceive. It’s funny, isn’t it, that we call it trying to conceive when what we really mean is they were banging a lot at strategic times. Anyway." He shrugged. "So finally, after years of unprotected sex, bam, there I was. A perfectly healthy child, naturally adored by all—"

"So far, ninety percent of this story is your parents banging—excellent word, by the way, nobody uses it enough," she interjected, one eyebrow lifting, "but it’s you I'm interested in hearing about."

"I know, I’m fascinating, but I am getting there. You asked for my life story, and that’s how it starts."
"Sex is how most life stories start. You're beginning to sound fixated."

"I'm not going to apologize for providing the necessary context to understand my life."

"Fair enough." She twirled around on the spot, her back now facing him. "Carry on, I'm listening."

"Thank you," he said, fighting a smile, even though she couldn't see it, since it would ruin his
deadpan delivery. "As I was saying, I was obviously an only child, and since my parents had had to
bang for so long to get me, they treasured me like none other and gave me everything I ever
wanted and more." He paused. "In retrospect some of that was not good for me, but that's
parenting, isn't it?"

Lily looked over her shoulder at him, an amused smile playing at her lips. "Aside from the sex
fixation, I think the damage was fairly minimal. Do continue to thrill me with this epic tale."

"As the lady commands," he said with a spiraling gesture. "Well, from there it was the usual
spoiled childhood. Posh school, football captain, head boy, I think you get the picture. Then
university where I made terrific friends, so on and so forth. Finished school and my mum gave me
the greatest of all gifts ever known to humankind, a wonderful, scraggly little cat that bit me on
sight."

"He's never bitten me," said Lily, directing her words to the sky, it seemed. "I mean, of course he
hasn't, I'm fantastic and not at all spoiled. He's got no reason to keep me in line."

"Excuse me, I did nothing to deserve that first bite. Subsequent ones, sure, but not the first." He
lifted his eyebrows. "Anyway, after uni I started working at my dad's company...and then my mum
asked me to do this show, so here we are."

Lily made a small, contemplative sound beneath her breath. "So, if your mum wanted you to do
this show, did your dad also ask you to work at his company?"

James rubbed at his hair. "I mean...he didn't ask, really. He did offer, though, and I took him up on
it."

"Oh, okay," she said, and turned around to face him again. She didn't seem at all concerned that
she might accidentally back into a deer or a tree. "For a moment I thought you were obedient to
some kind of fault."

James gave a full-throated laugh. "Please. If he'd told me I absolutely, under all circumstances had
no choice but to join the company firm... Well, I would've told him to go jump off a cliff onto
some sharp and pointy rocks. Only I'd've said it nicer, since he's my dad and all. But with some
bite, since it's my dad we're talking about."

She hung back for a second, letting him catch up to her before falling in step with him. The deer
had come a lot closer now, about fifty meters off, where they were munching on a rare patch of
green grass. The heat wave had turned most of it to straw.

"So," Lily said, continuing to be a conversational hero. "Do you like your job enough to stick with
it for the long haul, or do you want to do something else eventually?"

He drew his lips to the side. It was funny, really, how little he'd thought about these things, or how
infrequently anyone else asked him about this stuff.

"I mean...I like it well enough, I guess. It's something to do, and it pays well, and it can be fun
sometimes. I dunno." He kicked a stray rock on the trail. "What about you? What's your life story,
"My life story," she echoed, and scrunched up her nose while she considered this question. "Well, much like you, I was also born because my parents had sex, but unlike you, I don't go on about it like they invented the act, so there's that, and let's see..." She let a few seconds of silence go by, the only sounds the birds in the distance, their own footfalls, and the hushed murmurs of the camera crew. "I suppose my parents first recognized my genius when I was five, and I disproved the existence of Santa using only a carrot and a felt-tip pen—"

"A carrot?"

"No time for that. I've got an older sister named Petunia—see if you can spot a theme there—who is my exact opposite in practically every way," Lily ploughed on, smiling to herself, no doubt at the prospect of denying him an interesting anecdote. "I went to uni in Cardiff and got a first, which I'm pretty proud of, my father passed away when I was twenty, I want to write a novel one day, and even though my parents combed through three generations of family members on both sides, nobody has any idea where my hair and eyes came from. I'm a ginger sheep in a family of grey-eyed blondes. Might be the milkman's daughter. Who knows?"

"If so, the milkman was extremely handsome."

She blushed a little, but otherwise didn't react to the implication. "It might explain my deep and enduring love of dairy."

It was a pretty good life story, as far as twenty-eight-year-olds went. She had a degree and dreams and inexplicably good looks.

And a strangely, unbelievably boring job.

"So you got a first at uni," James said, his eyebrows drawing together, "and you want to write a novel someday...and now you work in a shop?"

"Yep," she said lightly. "That's about it in a nutshell."

"Right," he said, although it really didn’t add up at all. "Right."

Then he stopped and said, "No, I take that back—not right. What I meant is, what the hell?"

As he'd stopped walking, she’d halted, too. "What I do for a living suits me," she replied, her chin tilting upwards. "I've got a very specific plan which requires me to have a job that lets me work anywhere, or one that I can leave on a moment's notice. I found one that fits one of those criteria. What do you mean, what the hell?"

"I mean I just picture you sitting there dead bored every day, wasting your talent and withering away or whatever. But you’re too clever to do it for no reason, so what’s this very specific plan that demands you be able to disappear whenever?" He sucked in a breath, eyes going wide. "Don’t tell me you’re going to fake your own death as some sort of insurance fraud."

"Yes," she said dryly. "You’ve caught me." She rolled her eyes. "I’ll tell you my perfectly legal plans in a moment, but it’s interesting that you’d make those judgments about my job when you’re so decidedly unlike anyone I’ve ever met, yet your career path is following the most cut-and-dry rich boy trajectory I’ve ever heard of. I don’t buy that you’re happy about it."

It shouldn’t have surprised him that she located one of his Achilles heel spots. Because he admittedly was a typical, sporty rich boy in a lot of ways, and it wasn’t like he was thrilled about
being a terrible stereotype, but he really wasn't the sort of bloke that just up and followed in his dad’s footsteps.

He just didn’t know where to take his own.

"Well," he retorted, "at least I’m at a job that requires my degree and actually uses my brain."

"Oh, I see. All that personality and imagination, and you work for your dad because he asked you nicely, but I’m the one who’s falling short because I’m not meeting your standards?"

"I’m not doing it because he asked—he offered—but it’s something, isn’t it? It’s not a waste of time or anything. I’m not even thirty. Would I love to know what else I should do? Of course I would! But I don’t yet, so I’m doing something."

"So it’s fine for you to coast by until you figure your life out, but I’m, what, the same age as you, and I’m not as good as you because of my job? You’re cool, but I’m just wasting my time?"

"But you know what you want to do—you want to write a novel! How’s working at a shop helping with that?"

"You sound like a snob," she said coldly. "And don’t worry about my novel—I know exactly what I need to do to write it. I’ve been saving every penny I own for nine years to make it happen, and when I do, it’ll be because of the decisions I made, even if you think I’m somehow lacking."

"I don’t think you’re lacking at all—the exact opposite, which is why I don’t understand. What’s this thing you’ve been saving for all these years?"

She looked as if she was considering landing a swift kick to his unmentionables, but instead let out a huff of air.

"I’m going to travel next year," she said. "For a year, maybe longer. I’ve never been anywhere—not abroad, anyway—so that’s what I’m going to do, because I want to go everywhere, and see everything, and—and live, I guess, and learn things, and then I’ll write my book."

Christ, she was a marvel.

She never backed down, not for a second, not even when he’d apparently been barking up the completely wrong tree. Or meowing, rather, since he was a cat person through and through.

"Oh," he said with a frown. "That makes a lot more sense." He scratched his head. "That’s brilliant, actually. Like, super amazingly brilliant, and it absolutely suits you, and...yeah."

"I’m ever so glad you approve," she said flatly.

The deer were only about ten meters off now, and under other circumstances, James would have been bouncing like a child at a petting zoo. But for once, wild animals he could ride—and that he felt a peculiar affiliation with—weren’t as interesting as people.

"Right, well." He cleared his throat, feeling a bit flush in the face. "I hope you get to go soon, and do all the things you want, in all the places you want, with all the, er, people you want. Because you deserve it."

"I’m going alone," she said, with a curious twitch of her lips. "It’s kind of shit because I’d love to travel with someone, but nobody our age can afford it and I can only pay for myself. Besides, most of my friends are getting settled into their lives now, but it’s fine—I like my own company, and this
"way it leaves me open to have really disappointing sex with a hot guy I meet on a beach in Santorini."

"You’re looking forward to disappointing sex? Wow. Shoot for the stars, why don’t you."

"It’s called ‘having realistic expectations,’ and at least I’ll be in Greece having disappointing sex," Lily shot back. "What about you? Can you name one thing you really, desperately want that you’re actively working to get? Because I might not have a fancy job like yours, but at least I’m being proactive."

It was uncanny, how quickly she picked him apart, how adeptly she exposed and comprehended his inner workings.

What was he working on?

Beating his times on Mario Kart. Mastering the art of the paper airplane at work. Convincing Algernon to fetch. But beyond that…

He wasn’t after a promotion. He wasn’t saving for a house. He wasn’t checking travel destinations off some sort of bucket list.

The only goal he’d technically "worked on" since finishing uni was going to sound inane compared to Lily’s excellent, ambitious goals. But he could either fess up or say nothing, and Lily would give him even more shit if he went with the latter.

"I want to get married," he said, watching one of the deer nudge another with its antlers. "I want to have kids. I want them to play with Algernon and drive him mad. He’d never hurt a baby, you know, so it’ll be all right. He’ll restrain himself."

Lily didn't immediately respond to this admission, but when he mustered up the will to glance at her, he found her gazing at him with an unmistakable softness in her pretty eyes, all her hard edges scrubbed away.

"Why are you saying that like you're admitting to something shameful?" she asked him quietly. "It's not like I don't want that stuff, too."

"Because it’s—I dunno." He kicked at the path. "Cliché, I guess. It’s not like I’m trying to save the world or anything."

"Who cares if it's cliché, if it's what you want? You think I'd rather be having awful sex with a Greek stranger than really good sex with a proper boyfriend who came to Greece with me? Of course I wouldn't. I want love. I want to love someone so much that it makes my chest hurt. There's nothing wrong with that."

"That it makes your chest hurt—yeah," he said with a thin smile. "Yeah, that sounds about right."

"I guess you're doing something about the marriage thing," she said, gesturing to the space around them. "Not that I think a reality show is an ideal setting to really get to know a person, but it'll all be over soon, and then you can go on normal, real people dates."

"No," he deadpanned. "This is it. This is my big plan. Get on the Bachelor, immediately marry some person I only half-know, become a dad in nine months." He watched as the deer now wandered away, off toward a nearby patch of woods. "In all seriousness, though, I’ve been dating the last few years. Nothing stuck, but I am, you know, working on it."
"Well, it's not as if you have to stick to this one-track mission to find a wife, or anything, forsaking all other ambitions. I want to get married and be a mother, but I'm sure as hell going abroad first."

"You should," he told her. "You absolutely should, since your trip sounds incredible, disappointing sex and all." He started walking again, and she tagged along, this time at his side. "So where're you going on this grand adventure, then?"

"Oh," she said, her eyes lighting up. "I'm going everywhere. I've got it all planned—I want to start in Barcelona and see everything Gaudi designed, and then Bruges because it looks so bloody charming, and then Stockholm to go sailing on the archipelago, and I really want to see the Northern Lights but I'm in two minds as to when's the best time to see them because people's opinions differ so much, but I figure I'll squeeze them in—then there's Rome and Bratislava and Transylvania and Athens, and that's just Europe. I want to go all the way around the globe, then finish in Dublin, because my mum was born there and I've never seen it."

She had more passion and enthusiasm than the rest of the women combined. And that was just about one of her goals.

It wasn’t that he had never wanted to visit those places. He had been to some of them, on a lark or with friends. But traveling with Lily would be different. It wouldn’t be drinking in a bar and then seeing what fun they could find. She’d want to see attractions and learn about the history and all that, but she also wouldn’t be so stodgy as to only stick to a daily, to-the-minute itinerary.

A ridiculous idea popped into his mouth, bypassing his brain entirely.

"I'd go with you," he heard himself say. "You know. If you wanted."

She stared at him for a very long moment.

"You'd go—" she began, and let out a weak laugh. "You'd go traveling, for a full year, around the world with me?"

"I mean, yeah. Why not? I think it’d be fun, and my dad owns the company—it’s not like I couldn’t get the time off."

"It's not the logistics of the thing, it's—" She looked around as if she hoped someone else would spring out from behind a tree and provide an explanation on her behalf. "How exactly would that work, when I've told you I have feelings for you, but you like somebody else?"

And this was why he sometimes contemplated punching himself in the mouth. It was always running off on its own, never thinking anything through, and then abandoning his brain when it needed help saving James.

"Er," he said. "That...is an excellent point. I have a response. Somewhere. But I just, ah, can’t share it with you. Right now." After a second, he added, "Sorry."

Lily looked around again, this time as if the person hiding behind the tree might be preparing to leap out and pie her in the face.

"Um, okay?" she said eventually. "I mean, I appreciate the offer, but it doesn't quite seem like an emotionally healthy decision for...well, either of us, given the circumstances."

"I agreed to do this show, which I think we can all acknowledge was a terribly unhealthy decision, emotionally. I do things all the time without thinking them through, but they usually work out."
"Well, this did work out for you, right?" she said delicately. "Because...because of Isabella."

"Right," he said stiffly. "Yes. Because I found someone I really connect with."

"And that's—great, yeah. I'm very happy for you both," said Lily, and didn't bother feigning a smile to accompany it, "though we should really try to get close to some actual deer, or else this whole trip will be pointless, yeah?" She nodded to the now-distant deer. "Don't try to ride them, though. I could practically see the intent in your eyes when we had that safety talk earlier, and I'd like to show my face around here again."

Then she walked off in the deer's direction, taking great care not to tread on a patch of daisies.

Seriously, he thought with a grin as he followed after her. Her perception was uncanny.

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"I need to clear three things with you before we go inside," said Lily to James, whirling around on a cracked paving stone she'd once buried her pocket money beneath as a child, only for the pleasure of designing a treasure map and imploring her sister to find it. "One, yes, you can have a go on the stairlift—"

"Stairlift?" he asked, his mouth forming a delighted, childlike smile.

"Yeah, it used to be my dad's, but we never took it down," she said, then added, "It drives me up the wall."

"Oh. My. God," he said. "Both your excellent wordplay and that you have a bloody stairlift. Can I go more than once?"

"If you can stick to my other two decrees, you can go as many times as you like."

"Fine. Hit me with your decrees, your highness." He paused. "The highness part was a reference to your thronelift, by the way, not an insult."

"You continue to define drama in new and bizarre ways," she informed him, and laughed at the look of mock outrage that crossed his face. "Second decree—despite the fact that she's lived in this country since 1986 and married an Englishman, my mother still talks about England as if it's the supreme seat of all evil and will absolutely try to draw you into sympathizing with her by talking about what they did in India. Don't let her do it or she won't shut up all day."

"I mean...what they did in India was evil," he said, with a gesture toward his brown face.

"I know, and I completely agree with you, but my mum's like a dog with a bone—she literally won't stop if she thinks she's got an audience."

"Fine. But only because I want to ride the stairlift."

"That's precisely why I opened with it," she said. "Third, and most importantly, please don't tell my mother that I fancy you. She'll guess after about five minutes, but I need those five minutes. Those five minutes are my sanctuary."

He saluted. "So noted."

She returned his salute, not because she particularly wanted to, but because she knew it'd make him smile if she did, and she was a soft idiot of the highest order.

He did smile, and the resulting butterflies in her tummy had become so familiar at this point that
she might as well have picked out names and started a WhatsApp group chat with all five hundred of them.

Yes, they'd had another near-argument in the park.

No, it hadn't done a thing to put her off him. They seemed to have a knack for heated conversations, and a lot of that was rooted in the topics they discussed, but Lily couldn't shake the feeling that there was something else—warmer and more intimate—simmering away beneath it all.

Besides, she couldn't bring herself to dislike James for what he'd said, not when his worst crime was to want the best for her, to think she was destined for better than the crappy fake job Rufus had picked out for her fake application.

Lily wished she could just tell him the truth and be done with it. She didn't think he'd mind—in fact, he'd probably be thrilled, given his belief that she was squandering her talents—especially once she explained that her article wouldn't paint him in a negative light. It had mostly become a malediction on Rita Skeeter, who sorely needed to be taken down several pegs.

Unfortunately, she doubted she'd get a minute off-camera to speak to him before she left the show. She was vaguely aware that, should she stay past the next ceremony, there'd be an opportunity to spend the night in a camera-free suite with him, but she couldn't imagine him offering that up to anyone but Isabella.

In any case, it was time to enter the lion's den.

Rita had been openly disappointed by the tiny terraced house which Lily had called home in her youth. Rita's lips had screwed up in distaste as she took in the tiny patch of grass that made for a garden, her mother's battered old Fiat, and the peeling white paint on the window frames outside. The other three girls came from larger, wealthier families and undoubtedly had more impressive homes to showcase, but Rita could shove her disappointment up her arse. Lily had had a happy childhood in this house, and that was worth so much more than a perfectly manicured lawn or an expensive car.

The whole situation was, of course, ridiculously pre-arranged. Her mother's outline was clearly visible behind the rippled glass panes of the front door, waiting for Lily to knock so she could open the door and act as if she hadn't seen her in six weeks, when the reality was a lot shorter.

Nonetheless, her mum's joy upon seeing her was not remotely feigned.

"My baby!" she cried, and enveloped Lily in a bone crushing hug, complete with many lipstick kisses on her cheeks and forehead. "I haven't seen you in ages! Missed you to death!"

Should anyone ever ask Lily why she felt such a fondness for dramatic people, she'd point to her mother and let them figure out the rest.

"I missed you, too," Lily said when she finally managed to escape her vice-like arms.

"Let me look at you properly." Her mother held her out at arm's length, took a quick scan of her from head to toe, and frowned concernedly. "You've lost weight off your face."

"That's because the show switched me to a new diet where you're forced to degrade yourself on a daily basis until you're physically sick from the shame of it all," Lily replied, and ignored Rita, who made a big show of gasping in offence. She waved carelessly over her shoulder. "This is James Potter, anyway. James, this is my mum, Grace."
He offered a charming grin and his hand. "Lovely to meet the mother of such a delightful woman."

Her mother let out a girlish laugh and released her, springing forward to take hold of his hand.

"Ooh, delightful, he says," said Grace, beaming up at him. "Aren't you just tall and gorgeous altogether?"

"I am," he said solemnly. "Also witty, educated, and fully employed."

Lily turned and pulled a face at him, a face that said dial it down and she's my mum, not Isabella's, and what are you playing at now? but James was too busy lapping up her mother's admiration to notice.

"Not ten seconds and he's out for my blessing already, what spell have you cast on this one?" said Grace, with a wry look for her daughter. "Come inside then, James Potter, and we'll try to find a fault with you."

She slipped her hand through the crook of his arm and led him into the house, and Lily followed, noting immediately that the hall had been scrubbed, vacuumed, and tidied to within an inch of its life. Her mother must have been cleaning for days in preparation for their visit.

"Now, James," Grace was saying as she directed him towards the kitchen, which doubled as a dining area, a gossip spot, and a witness to many dramatic board game arguments. "I've made scones, and I know Lily will want a Chinese later, but the very nervous young lad who set up the cameras earlier also said that my daughter insists upon me feeding you bacon sandwiches. Was he right?"

"I defer to your daughter," he answered. "I have no idea if she insisted. If she did, I wouldn’t be surprised, since it feels like she does nothing but pick me apart. Did you know she sent me pirate golfing?"

"I didn't insist," said Lily, frowning at their backs. "I strongly suggested, and only because you mentioned liking them."

"Now, see, if my daughter's trying to feed you up, she must be fond of you, because she's a born nurturer like her wonderful mammy," said Grace, having reached the kitchen with her tight grip on James still intact. "And I've got a brilliant video of—was it your eighteenth birthday party? Which one had the pirate theme? She's off her face on Malibu and lemonade, in any case. I think it's—"

"Mother," said Lily warningly.

"Daughter," Grace replied, smiling sweetly. "Remember to be nice, or I'll break out the baby photos."

"You do what you like, I was a fucking cute baby."

Grace rolled her eyes and looked at James, with a jerk of her head towards Lily. "I used to be able to out-sass her, you know."

"You did," Lily agreed, lifting her chin proudly, "and then I turned six."

"It’s always a proud moment," James offered, "when the pupil surpasses the master that taught her."

He was getting far too comfortable with her mum already, and it was going to give Grace ideas.
"Where's Petunia?" said Lily, feeling as if she had to derail the subject. "I assume she's not coming?"

The smile slipped from her mother's face a little. "Petunia's—ah, well, still a bit...you know."

Lily did know.

Considering the fact the last time she'd seen Petunia, she'd been crying her eyes out while Vernon stormed out of the kitchen, crowing loudly about disrespect and rudeness, it would have been some kind of miracle if she'd actually bothered to come and see Lily for the occasion.

James Potter wouldn't hear a word of that from her, not on camera, not even when he looked at Lily the way he was looking at her now, with undisguised curiosity and concern.

"Anyway," said her mum brightly, and gave James a little push towards the dining table, behind which a long bench ran half the length of the wall. "Go and sit down, both of you. Take the bench, it's more comfortable."

While James was being guided—gently, she hoped—to one side of the bench, Lily slid onto the other and clasped her hands in her lap. He plopped down next to her, looking as comfortable as if he'd been to visit her home many times, and belonged there as much as she did.

"Don't go holding hands under the table," her mother quipped, and Rita actually ducked to see if they had. Lily put both hands on the surface of the table at once. "Now, tell me, is Lily a cheeky shite at the house, or is she nicer to you than she is to her poor mother?"

"Let's just say," James told Grace, "that when the show airs, I think you will be exceptionally proud of Lily and her wit." He glanced sideways. "Most of the time."

"I'm always exceptionally proud of her," said Grace, pointing to her daughter. "Look at that face. She could have got away with having no personality at all, with a face like that, but she decided to be interesting and stuck to it."

"A choice for which I and many of the other people in the castle are very grateful."

Why was he laying it on so thick, and why was it so bloody appealing?

Lily wanted to turn to James and ask him, but that would only raise uncomfortable questions.

"Except for Helena," she said lightly. "I'm sitting squarely at the top of her list of enemies."

"True," he said, "but the rest of us thoroughly enjoyed the various ways you told her to shut up and go away."

"Helena was this insane woman who kept sexually harassing James," Lily told her mother, "and who I still suspect might have been a plant to keep things interesting. At least, I hope she was a plant, because the alternative is terrifying."

"I don't think she was a plant," James said thoughtfully. "A plant wouldn't have been willing to stay on past the first injury." To Grace, he added, "Helena only left the show because she took a paintball to the eye. It was the moment we'd all been waiting for. Well, her leaving. Not the tragic paintball accident."

Grace filled the kettle with water at the sink. "I thought you got to decide who leaves and who stays?"
"He doesn't," said Lily simply. "Not—not fully, I don't think. Do you get much of a say?" she added, looking at James curiously. "I never asked after the whole fishing thing."

Rita made a slashing motion across her throat, but Lily didn't even know why she bothered with such warnings any longer. James may have been slightly more obedient by himself, but he and Lily seemed to have reached an unspoken agreement to ignore everything Rita did when they were together.

"Some," he replied. "The contract says the producers have final say, though. Which means it’s really their fault Helena almost lost an eye, since she’d have been off the show immediately if it had been up to me." James gave a small wave to the producers. "Excellent work, lads! And Rita."

"What fishing thing is this?" said her mother.

This was a sly move on her part because, thanks to Lily's contraband phone, she already knew that her daughter had tried and failed to get herself kicked off by mucking up the fishing date. There was no way for Lily to call her out on it, though, not in front of James, Rita, and three strategically-placed cameras.

"I meant phishing," said Lily quickly. "As in, the fraudulent attempt to steal personal data from the unsuspecting public. They make us do weird things on this show."

"This is true," James agreed, without so much as a hint that she was lying through her teeth. "They make us do very weird things like romance book photoshoots."

Lily gave a short laugh. "You were ridiculous that day, trying to pull that stupid face. I think the image will be forever burned into my brain until I finally die an old woman, laughing at the memory, surrounded by my terribly confused grandchildren."

"Are these the poor, confused grandchildren you’ll have with the disappointing man in Santorini?"

"I'm not going to procreate with the disappointing Santorini man. What kind of careless idiot do you take me for?"

"I mean, maybe you warm up to him. Maybe there’s an accident. Maybe it’s a Mamma Mia style scenario after you’ve just had your heart broken—I can’t predict the future."

"Clearly you can't, if you think I wouldn't take the appropriate precautions to avoid giving my children a sleazy father, though I now see that you only offered to come with me because you're determined to scupper my chances with Santorini guy."

"I’m only looking out for you, Lily. I’m trying to save you from disappointing sex and confused grandchildren."

"Couldn't you save me from disappointing sex by, you know, not being the person I have sex with?" she retorted slyly, and with a triumphant smile.

"Wow. A truly below the belt remark. I expected better from you."

Lily started to laugh in earnest, both at the wordplay and the stupidly pious look on his face.

"I'm so sorry if I caused offence," she said, giggling. "I'm sure you're far less inadequate than my Santorini sleazebag and his billowing white shirt."

"You’re the one planning to have confused grandchildren. I can only assume it’s because of his
terrible bed and clothing habits. My grandchildren will be extremely clever and not remotely confused."

"For the last time, I'm not going to get pregnant by some random, oily—"

"Sorry to interrupt this adorable flirting," said Grace, as the kettle clicked loudly to indicate that it had boiled, "but would you like tea or coffee, James?"

"Er," he said, blinking as though he’d forgotten she was there, "tea. Please."

"Tea it is," she said cheerfully, but with an amused glint in her eye that Lily recognized all too well. "It's nice to see how well the two of you are getting along. Lily, obviously, went on the show for her grandad's sake, so I didn't think she'd warm to you quite so well."

"Well, James is only on the show at his mother's request," Lily explained. She drummed her fingers on the table. "He's not really like all the other bachelors from the telly."

He nudged her with his shoulder. "Careful, Evans. That came dangerously close to a direct, un-veiled compliment."

"Well, I mean, it's not that—so, okay, I got sunburned this one time, and he asked his mother to get aloe for me. And mosquito bite cream. And cold medicine, before that," Lily continued, wanting Grace to like him almost as much as she wanted him to stop angling for her mother's approval. Then she laughed. "God, someone should have thrown me on a scrapheap, I've basically been a mess since I started, but he—you," she amended, and met his eyes briefly, "were very kind to sort that through your mum."

He ducked his head. "I mean—it's really unfair the stuff they keep putting you through."

"They're so much worse to you, though. We girls get time off camera to talk to each other at night, at least, and that helps, but you're on your own mostly, aren't you?"

Rita looked as if one of her veins was about to pop and splatter the kitchen walls with whatever poisonous substance ran through them in place of blood.

"Yeah," he said. "Even though my mum and mates are around, I’m not really allowed to talk to them much. Or at least not about important things." He looked at Grace. "It used to be worse at the beginning of the show but then Lily was all, stop letting them walk all over you, Potter, you’re in control here!"

Grace joined them at the table with three mugs of tea in hand.

"Oh, did she now?" She slid one over the table to James, and took a seat across from him. "Got cross with you, did she? Gave you a right telling off?"

"On multiple occasions, in fact."

Her mother gave her a look that said, I am so on to you, you smitten kitten.

Lily delicately ignored her, and took a mouthful of tea that burned like a bitch, though she managed to hold it together and look as if she hadn't just scalded the inside of her mouth.

"She's got quite a habit of sticking up for people, Lily does," said Grace airily. "Even when it gets her in trouble—especially when it gets her in trouble. I got called into school because of it more than once. Our little mouthpiece, her dad used to call her." She reached over and patted Lily's hand.
"Still, it's the thing I love most about her. That, and her lovely red hair."

This was ridiculous.

Her mother had obviously gotten the wrong idea about her and James, having been fooled by his sudden and strange attempts to charm her, as if Lily was an actual prospect he was hoping to win over. She was clearly settling in for some sort of lovefest wherein she would brag and boast and inevitably embarrass her daughter until she wanted to climb beneath the table—with no Algernon to keep her company this time—and set up camp there.

Lily felt somewhat justified in blaming James for this deception, though she had to claim a share in it.

They had definitely been flirting, though she couldn't really tell who was the instigator.

James propped his elbow on the table, his chin on his hand. "Lily informed me her true father might be the milkman. Please weigh in on this, Grace."

"Told you she's the odd one out, has she?" Grace smiled at him. "Her dad always said he couldn't have had a hand in something so pretty, but she got his brains, so we're fifty percent certain."

"She is exceptionally lovely, it’s true."

"And have you heard her play the pia—"

"Stairlift," said Lily quickly, and grabbed James's hand, the one that wasn't propping up his chin on the table. His fingers twined with hers at once, as if prompted by instinct to respond to her touch, which made her heart flip over. She stoutly ignored the feeling. "I said he could have a go on the stairlift, and you were going to make sandwiches, yeah?"

"I can if you're hungry," said her mother.

"Starved." Lily shuffled to the edge of the bench and tugged James along with her. "Bacon and peanut butter are fine. We shouldn't be too long."

She didn't wait for James to agree or disagree to this plan, but led him out of the kitchen by the hand—which she regretted, because the cameras had certainly caught it, and Rita was murmuring to herself like a drunken lout on a public bus—and into the hall, where lived the infamous stairlift.

"You're encouraging her," she told him sternly, and dropped his hand like it was a hot, rotten potato—which was quite a thing, considering she was half-Irish. "I've got half a mind to revoke your stairlift privileges."

"Empty threat, Evans," he said with a grin. "Your mum would totally let me ride it if I asked."

"I don't make empty threats," she retorted, knowing as the words left her mouth that she'd likely let him have his way. "And I assume you're used to passive-aggressive office jargon by now, so per my last email regarding acting weird, please stop talking to my mother like I'm your bloody girlfriend and you're desperate for her approval."

"I'm not talking like you're my girlfriend!" he protested. "I'm just doing what I do with any parents: win them over heartily. It’s an instinct, like flinching when something comes at your face, or punching someone when you see a Volkswagen Beetle."

Lily could have happily thrown a punch or two herself—mostly at Rita—were she a less civilized
woman, with or without a Volkswagen Beetle.

"You told her you were witty, educated, and fully employed," she reminded him. "Please, name *one* other friend whose mother you introduced yourself to like that."

"I mean, I didn’t use those *exact* words, but I said similar things to Bonnie’s parents. Also Remus’s, I think, but when I met them I was seven and I told them I lived in a big house with lots of toys for Remus to share." He gave her a skeptical look. "It’s nothing special. You of all people should have picked up on the fact that I am a massive show-off."

"Did you also tell Bonnie's parents that she was exceptionally lovely, and if so, did you do that before or *after* you offered to go traveling with her?"

"The situation with Bonnie’s family was much more awkward because she told them about shooting Helena in the eye, and her traumatized brother was there, so no, I did not randomly start praising her looks. Also, her brother said she likes to travel *alone,* so offering to go along sometime would’ve been a ridiculous move, whereas you said you’d love for someone to go with you."

"I meant a friend or a boyfriend, not *you,* not—" she began, then pressed her lips together, inhaling through her nose.

This made for their second argument in a day, only this one was taking place roughly ten feet from her loving, unsuspecting mother.

She wasn't going to do this again.

She took another breath, and shook out her hands by her sides as if she were ridding herself of water.

"This isn't up for debate, James," she said, trying to remain calm. "If I tell you you're acting weird, it means you're acting weird, and that makes me feel like shit, so I'd like you to stop."

"Right." He crossed his arms over his chest. "If that’s the case, please tell me which part I shouldn’t have said. Which part made you feel like shit?"

"You offered to go abroad with me!" she snapped, abandoning her resolve to keep things calm in an instant. "Which was...twelve kinds of inappropriate, and though you say you have a *response* for it you can't tell me what it is, so that means nothing, and now you're cozying up to my mother as if it's remotely feasible that I'll spend any time with you at all once this whole thing is over."

"Seriously?" He pulled a face. "I'm not sorry for offering because I *do* want to go. And I’m not going to apologize for treating your mum like someone I like, because I *do* like her, she’s lovely. I mean, what was I supposed to do, trash talk you in front of her and then throw hot tea in her face?"

Lily could have laughed outright, but the anger that shuddered through her gut at his nonchalant answer far outweighed her amusement.

He *wanted* to go with her.

Wanted to. Just because.

Him, her, and Isabella, probably, because fuck Lily's feelings. It didn't matter how difficult that would be for her. It didn't matter that Lily *knew* he liked her more than he was willing to let on, because he'd picked another girl he liked better and had been perfectly clear on that, but maybe he wanted to have his cake and eat it, too. James was going to do whatever he wanted, clearly.
He'd told her he wouldn't mess her around again, yet here he was, messing her around and not remotely sorry about it.

"If this whole situation were reversed," she said, lowering her voice, "and you had feelings for me, and I wanted someone else, but thought it was perfectly fine to act the way you've been acting, would you expect me to argue back if you told me it was hurtful?"

"Look," he said, unfolding his arms. "I get that you're upset, but honestly—you're sniping at me for getting along with your mum. I legitimately have no clue what else I should have done in there, all right?"

She felt, horribly, as if she might start to cry, and that was the last thing she wanted to do at that moment—in front of him or the cameras.

"This is getting us nowhere," she sighed, her tensed shoulders dropping as the air left her lungs. "You know what? Do what you want, honestly, just keep in mind that you're giving my mother the wrong idea, and it's not you who'll have to explain the truth to her later."

She un-clipped her microphone pack from the back of her shorts, switched it off before one of the sound guys could even think to make a start for her, and shoved it into her back pocket.

"Lily," he said plaintively, but she cut him off.

"I need the bathroom," she said, directing her words at Rita, and stomped upstairs, feeling remarkably and regrettably like a stroppy teenager.

Lily took her time regaining her composure, but after she came downstairs with a bundle of books from her old bedroom—Rita let her put them in the car only after Lily threatened to quit if she didn't—the rest of the day passed without further incident.

James mustn't have wanted to upset her again, because he dialed himself down a notch. He was as friendly as could be with Grace, but instead of heaping platitudes on Lily's head, he talked about his parents, his cat, and the accidental explosions that sometimes occurred at his workplace. He asked her mother questions about Ireland and seemed interested in the answers she gave, though whether he was or not was anyone's guess.

Lily got the impression that he was just trying to keep Grace talking.

Rita was so desperate to keep the cameras rolling on them both that she let the afternoon run past schedule, long enough for James to declare that he'd been wholly converted to peanut butter on bacon sandwiches, lose horribly to Grace at a game of Monopoly (her mother always cheated, but he wasn't to know), and share some kissing duck from the Chinese with Lily. It turned out that they both liked the same thing, and Lotus Garden always made their portions too large.

When Lily pretended, in the most deadpan of ways, that the message in her fortune cookie contained the lyrics to Cotton Eye Joe, James laughed so hard he almost choked on his drink, and she had to thump him on the back.

At some point, Lily relaxed enough that she felt as if they'd stumbled back to some semblance of normal, even though the air between them felt terribly thick at times.

She liked him so much.

She was angry, still, but James made it very difficult to cultivate any real animosity by being funny and charming and treating her mother nicely.
He shouldn’t have offered to come traveling with her, she kept reminding herself.

Lily wanted him to go abroad with her. She wanted him to hold her hand while they wound their way through flea markets and out-of-the-way museums. She wanted him to sit across from her while they sampled local food they never would have tasted otherwise. She wanted to have sex in the middle of a beautifully sunny day in Greece, simply because they could, and because it felt right, and because they had no other responsibilities to be getting on with.

She hated that.

Eventually, Rita was called from the room for an urgent phone call, and when she returned she announced that they’d be leaving for the castle at once. It came as a huge relief for Lily, even if it meant leaving her loving, wonderful mother. Grace cemented her fondness for James by issuing him an open invitation to the house when she hugged him goodbye, planting a firm kiss on his cheek before he left.

An accident on the M40 meant that the drive back to Winchester took almost ninety minutes longer than it should have, and Lily was forced into a confessional almost as soon as her feet hit the pebbled drive. By the time she’d made up enough nonsense to appease Rita, the late-July sun had started to set.

She trudged upstairs, feeling as if she'd been gone for several days instead of less than one, and entered her room to find Beatrice bustling around the room. Her friend had a bra in one hand and a hairbrush in the other.

On Bea's bed was an open suitcase, half-filled with her possessions.

"Hey!" cried Beatrice brightly, waving her bra above her head. "You're back later than I thought!"

"There was traffic on the way back," said Lily. "Packing for the trip already?"

"Oh, no. Funny story." Beatrice tossed her hairbrush into the case. "So I've been kicked off the show—"

"What?!"

"Oh, don't worry, I'm not actually leaving until tomorrow morning when they film the ceremony, but they caught me and Remus in flagrante, and Rita's apparently apoplectic."

"They caught—"

"Yup."

"While you were in the middle—"

"Smack bang in the middle."

"But you were so—"

"Careful?" Beatrice cocked an eyebrow at her. "Turns out we're not so careful when you're not around to act as my voice of reason. They called Rita about it earlier. Breakfast with her tomorrow should be pretty interesting."

"Oh," said Lily, and leaned back against the door. "Oh."

She felt as if someone had sucked all of the oxygen out of the room.
Beatrice was leaving.

Her friend, her best friend—a person she'd liked, trusted, and bonded with so quickly that they were going to get a flat together, live their lives in parallel to one another, the one person in the castle to whom she could say anything she was thinking, who was always on her side, who kept her sane through all of this absurdity—was leaving.

And that meant...it meant that Lily couldn't leave tomorrow morning, that James couldn't let her go—not yet, anyway.

"I'm happy out, to be honest," said Bea, folding a blouse over one arm, nattering away unconcernedly. "At least Remus and I can be out in the open now. He's going to help me move, when you and I get our place—I mean, he can't do much heavy lifting because of his heart condition, but he can help us decorate, and really I think it's a good sign that he's so eager to help—"

A lump was welling up in the back of Lily's throat.

"—because I know it's only been a few weeks, but I've never felt like this about anyone before, you know? He's just so sweet and intelligent, and he has this way of making me feel so steady, like everything is going to be fine, like I can breathe and relax and just be myself, and that—" Beatrice's smile slid from her face. "Babe?"

She wasn't going to cry.

She wasn't going to cry.

She shook her head, and a disobedient, traitorous tear slid down her cheek. "I'm fine."

"No, you are not fine," said Beatrice firmly. She crossed the room in an instant, gripped Lily's shoulders. "What happened today? What did he do?"

"Nothing," she insisted, but too quickly. "Nothing. He didn't—"

"I swear to God, if he said something to hurt you—"

"For Christ's sake, Beatrice, stop," said Lily loudly. "I'm not—I'm not crying because of James, you absolute bloody idiot, I'm crying because I'm going to miss you."

"You're going to—oh." Beatrice blinked, the bite vanishing from her voice. "Well, darling, I'll see you really soon."

"I know."

"And it's only a month and a bit until we can live together."

Lily nodded, a few more tears spilling out to join the intrepid first. "I know."

"Plus, you're going to go abroad tomorrow," Bea reminded her gently. "Exotic destination, remember? That's probably the only good thing about this whole deal."
"I know," said Lily, again, but she let out a sob like a child might have, and decided on the spot that she might as well just let herself be sad, "but it won't be any fun without you there."

"Oh, my sweetheart," Beatrice cooed, and drew her into her arms. "Nothing's ever fun without me there."
Remus had slept with Beatrice.

Repeatedly.

Remus. Sensible Remus. Level-headed, never charged into anything without thoughtfully considering the consequences over a cup of tea, owner of multiple sweater vests Remus Lupin had been sleeping with a contestant.

With Beatrice, no less.

Rita delivered the news when they arrived back at the house, forcing Remus to stand in the confessional room in front of James, Sirius, and Euphemia as she announced his sins.

"Betrayed at every turn," James cried.

Remus, the treacherous bastard, had the nerve to offer a half-smile and a one-shouldered shrug.

Sirius gave a few slow claps. "Well done, Remus. Never would’ve expected it from you."

"I admit," said Remus, "this is slightly outside the bounds of what I would consider generally acceptable behavior…” Two spots of pink appeared on his cheeks. "But like so many before me in history, love has driven me to distraction."

"Driven you to traitor town," James muttered. "Co-piloted by my other best mate."

Euphemia swept up to Remus and clasped his shoulders. "I’m so happy to see you in such high spirits. We should celebrate with some actual spirits. Excuse me, Stephen?" she called to one of the crew members, who turned his head back to her. "Margaritas all around."

"Don’t encourage him," James said.

"For once," Rita said, sounding vaguely shocked to be hearing herself say this, "I agree with Potter. This sort of behavior is unacceptable. It goes against everything this show stands for."

"Does it, though?" Sirius inquired.

Rita ignored him and addressed Remus. "This news cannot reach the public before the entire show has aired. Like James and his eventual fiancée, your relationship with Booth—should it even last that long—must remain under wraps. You cannot be seen together publicly."

Remus nodded. "We will, of course, respect your wishes."

Given that Remus’s contract almost certainly didn’t have the same clause as James’s about this—and given the too-innocent expression on Remus’s sly face—Remus would be doing absolutely no such thing.

Damn, but James had to respect him for that straight-faced lie.

"Unfortunately," Rita said, "we have no choice but to eliminate Beatrice at tomorrow’s rose ceremony."

"Doesn’t sound unfortunate to me," James said under his breath.
He wasn’t too put out to enjoy a margarita, though, especially when they were brought straight to them in the confessional room.

He ended up downing three before marching up to his room for what, he realized, would be his last night in the castle. Tomorrow they’d leave on a "grand adventure," where they’d film the remaining two episodes. After a few weeks trapped in a stodgy castle, the prospect of being held captive literally anywhere else appealed greatly.

Algernon was waiting for him on his bed, and even cocked his head at James’s entrance, silently asking for the latest news.

"Well," James said, swirling the margarita in his hand. It sloshed over the sides a bit, but who cared? It was his last night in this bloody room. He could positively trash it and it wouldn’t matter. That wasn’t in his contract. "I know you’ll be shocked—shocked—to learn that things went a bit...upside down. Today," he clarified. "With Lily."

He stumbled through a summary of his dates with Bea and Bonnie, spent twenty minutes ranting about Isabella’s family, and finally got to the meat of things with Lily in the deer park.

"She’s so...so pushy," he said, the edges of his words sliding together a bit as he lay sprawled on his bed. "But like...like a good pushy, you know? Like I was totally fucking up with the mosquito and the sunscreen—forgot to explain that bit, doesn’t matter, the point is, she was just like, ya basic. And then when I was all, you’re too good for your stupid bloody job, she was all, whyyyyy would you pretend to be happy with your job, Potter?"

Algernon meowed in agreement.

"Shuddup," James told him. "Just—listen. Okay? Listen. She’s got dreams and I—I wanna go with her. Around the world. I wanna hold her hand and kiss her and like...I wanna read her novel and tell her how good it is and pet her hair ‘cause it looks really, really nice. No. No, wait. Not pet. With humans you...touch. Yeah? Yeah. I wanna touch her hair." He sighed. "I can’t touch her eyes ‘cause that’s weird but they’re pretty too.”

He rolled onto his stomach, his elbows tucked beneath his chest to lift his head up. "Here’s the thing, Algernoon. I told Isabella that she’s like...perfect. And she’s soooooo great. Like really great."

Algernon sent him a skeptical look.

"No, I know, you never liked her, and like, I should listen to you, I should always always listen to you—" He had to pause as Algernon stood up and licked James’s cheek. "But like...she is great. But she’s not..."

He didn’t have to finish. Algernon got him that way.

"And then Lily was all pissy because, like, I was nice to her mum. And like—like I get it ‘cause I’ve been so...she’d say messing around, but I haven’t been, not since paintball, but she thinks I don’t like her, or something, and every time she goes on about how I don’t fancy her I die because I like her so bloody much, but I can’t tell her ‘cause of Isabella, and she looks so sad and I don’t want her to be sad. And she wouldn’t be sad if I told her and I wanna tell her, I wanna tell her so bad—"

He tried to push himself into a sitting position quickly, but balance was so hard. Once he got there, he raised a finger at Algernon. "But maybe that’s it, Algernoon. Maybe she knows I fancy her and
she thinks I’m messing about by not telling her! And maybe she wanted her mum to hate me so she could, or something, I dunno...but her mum was so nice and she thinks I’m handsome and she made peanut butter and bacon sandwiches, which were a fucking revelation, oh my God, wait ‘til you try it..."

He might’ve rambled more about sandwiches but he couldn’t remember in the morning.

The terrible, horrible, no good, and exceptionally bad morning due to the tiny dwarves digging mining tunnels in his brain with pick-axes, courtesy of tequila. James staggered about groaning as he threw his things haphazardly into his suitcase. He really should have packed before getting drunk on margaritas. That would’ve been the sensible thing to do.

He let Algernon out to find some breakfast, and was touched when he returned with a baggie full of aspirin.

James picked him up and kissed him on the head, eliciting an annoyed noise from Algernon. "Cheers," he said. "I’m sorry to ditch you for another week, but you know how unreasonable most hotels are about cats."

Algernon sent him off with a last lick to his cheek, then bounded out of James’s arms onto the ground, swishing his tail through the air. He lifted his head in a pseudo-nod that James took as a farewell, then strolled into the corridor.

He’d have the run of the castle for just a bit longer—James’s dad wouldn’t be by until later to pick him up and take him home. Algernon would no doubt be thrilled to finally not have to fight James for the front seat. Lucky cat. He got everything today, really.

James had to endure another pointless rose ceremony, the clatter and chatter of the production crew packing up everything, and his mum’s overenthusiasm throughout.

Thankfully by the time he settled into the car, the meds had kicked in to help with the hangover. His sunglasses helped too, even if he felt like a bit of a prick wearing them into the airport.

Rita corralled James, his mum, his mates, and the crew into a circle near the security gate. "Right," she said, handing a stack of slim papers to Bozo on her right. "These are your boarding passes—find yours and pass the rest along. James, the hosts, Euphemia, and I will be in first class. The women will be in economy with the crew. Bozo, if you so much as let them stand in queue for the toilet together, I’ll shove plane peanuts down your throat until you choke. It should be manageable given it’s a short flight—"

The boarding passes came around to James, but his mum snatched them out of his hand. "Since you’ve such an unfortunate tequila sensitivity, love, I’ll handle our paperwork today."

James managed to send her a faint smile.

Remus and Sirius were whispering about something and muffling their laughter across the circle, but they were traitors who were probably making fun of his sunglasses, even though they were the ones who drove him to drink in the first place.

His mum must have sensed the injustice. She made them wait at the gate while she took James shopping for snacks and magazines. He appreciated the kindness, but nothing sounded more appealing at the moment than lying down on the ground and passing out.

By the time she brought him back to the gate, he’d spent the meager bit of energy he did have, and
could only keep his eyes open just enough to follow her as she elbowed her way through other passengers to the first class boarding aisle. He stood there, sunglasses hiding his temporarily closed eyes, silently chanting don’t fall over don’t fall over as the gate attendant scanned their tickets.

He collapsed into his seat and immediately fell deeply asleep. Only his mum shaking him awoke him much too soon after that, and he stumbled sleepily off the plane after her.

As he stepped off the jetway, a terrible, horrible voice started speaking on the airport announcement system.

He ground to a halt and grabbed Euphemia’s arm.

"Mum," he said in a panic. "Did the plane get diverted?"

"Hm?" she said, much too sweetly. "No, dear. We’re precisely where we’re supposed to be."

He faced her fully, grasping both her arms now, looking down and pleading. "Tell me we’re not."

"Not what? Come along, we’re blocking the jetway." She broke out of his grasp and kept walking toward where Rita and the others had gathered near a gift shop.

A gift shop whose outer table was near overflowing with *Eiffel fucking Towers*.

"No," James said as he chased after her, that malicious French-speaking voice still blaring from overhead speakers. "We’re just connecting, right?"

"Welcome to the city of lights," Sirius said, arms spread.

*Oh,* Euphemia had told him when trying to persuade him to do the show, *think of the fun traveling bit of the show!*

Bullshit.

This was complete and absolute bullshit.

Slowly, section by section, James sank to the floor: first his knees connected with the tile. Then his arse plopped down, followed ultimately by his head (which he was, admittedly, very delicate about setting down because damned if he was letting the French take more brain cells from him).

"That’s rather unnecessary," his mum told him.

"Disagree," he said dully. "I’ll remain here until you book me one ticket home on the next flight."

"I will drag you to the car," Rita said. "Do you really want airport grime in your hair?"

The grime was actually a very convincing point.

But they’d brought him to *France*. He couldn’t just go along with that. Walking into Paris voluntarily went against everything he stood and laid down for.

"The girls will be here any second," Rita said. "We’ve a schedule to keep."

"And I’ve my sanity to keep," James said, "which can only be accomplished by departing French soil at once."
He carried on for a few more minutes, but he didn’t doubt for a second Rita’s commitment to pulling him by his arms to baggage claim. Also he didn’t fancy either Lily or Isabella witnessing that. That said, he did have a sense one or both might understand, given how clear he’d made his feelings on this cursed country.

He stayed silent the entire ride to the hotel, eyes closed behind his sunglasses, refusing to take in more of France than absolutely necessary.

Never one to waste production time, the show planned to send him on a date with Bonnie that evening. He had a brief reprieve in his room to mourn his arrival in France, enjoy one bottle of Belgian beer from the fantasy suite’s mini fridge, and prepare himself for what would be his last date with Bonnie.

At least, it would be Bonnie’s last date provided no one else on set was secretly sleeping with Isabella or Lily.

Which was impossible. They were both into him. They wouldn’t do him like that.

Then again, if Sirius and Remus had banged a contestant, maybe Peter was secretly wooing Isabella. It always was the quiet ones, James thought, narrowing his eyes at Peter as he waited for Bonnie to join him outside Notre-Dame.

Stupid Notre-Dame with its over-the-top Gothic architecture. That was the smug French all over, wasn’t it? Them and their too-long breads and their tasteless crepes. Even Bonnie, who was usually good for a laugh, seemed subdued by the excesses of the French.

Both she and James half-heartedly took in the carved stonework that some poor sod had spent pointless hours making while making idle small talk. Bonnie at least feigned some interest in the stained glass windows, but James saw right through her.

This was what the French did to people.

Up at the top of Notre-Dame, the incredibly underwhelming Eiffel Tower well within sight, James nudged her with his elbow. "Good to know someone’s on my side about France."

"Hm?" she said, the wind blowing her long black hair out behind her. "Oh. I quite like France, actually."

"Oh, er. Not much for churches, then?"

She studied him for a moment, then looked back out at the view. "Ah, yeah. You caught me."

"Me neither." He grimaced. "So much for the exotic destination, eh?"

"I dunno, I can’t exactly complain about a free trip. I’ve been to Paris loads of times, but it’s got a charm to it so I don’t mind coming back, even if I’ve got cameras dogging my every step."

"Seems to me like you’d have been better off skipping the show and just coming here on your own."

She didn’t say anything for a while, gazing out over the city, her bottom lip caught between her teeth.

"No," she said at last. "I’m glad I did this show, even though...even though it meant constantly being filmed."
He sent her a look. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. I mean, the show’s absolutely bonkers, but some of the people...well." She kicked her foot lightly against the wall in front of them, her hands clinging tighter to the top. "Some people can change your whole world, you know?"

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I do. I really, really do."

She hung her head. "I know you do."

He nearly asked if she meant Isabella or Lily—she hadn’t pressured him one way or the other, unlike basically everyone else in his life—but he caught himself in time.

Instead, he told her, "Well, if you ever start missing this show, you can pay someone to follow you around and film you doing everything but urinating. Right before you check yourself into a mental health facility, of course."

"It’s nice to have back-up plans," she said dryly. "But I think this’ll be the end of my reality career."

"Pity. I don’t think Helena hated you as much as the others, so when she gets her own spin-off show you could probably join that."

"Definitely won’t miss her," she said, but then her face softened, her lips twisting, looking almost pained. "But others..."

"Yeah," he said quietly. "Yeah."

When their plane touched down in Charles de Gaulle—much to the relief of Peter, who was sitting next to Bonnie in the row behind, and had spent the whole flight expelling jagged breaths into a paper bag—Lily surprised herself by bursting into tears.

This time, at least, she was crying because she was happy.

She was going somewhere. Finally.

A trip taken under all the rules and caveats of a reality show wasn’t what Lily would have picked for a maiden voyage, but beggars couldn’t be choosers. It was more than enough that she was abroad for the first time in her life, in France, of all places, home of gourmet dining, fine wines, and centuries of artistic genius. It was new, and it was different, and James hated it, which was...slightly gratifying, if she were being honest with herself.

After planning and dreaming and saving for so many years, only to find herself handed a free holiday in a beautiful country, everything she had been forced to put up with to get there—her boss, and James, and Rita and all the rest—didn't seem quite so bad. To add a cherry to the top of the cake, there wasn’t a camera or microphone in sight to capitalize on her tears.

Letting her emotions get the better of her under such circumstances was only right and natural, she reasoned, and she wasn’t a bit ashamed of herself.

Nevertheless, Lily’s sudden weeping came as quite a shock to poor Isabella, who had opted to sit next to her on the plane and naturally assumed that she was deeply distressed about something.

"Are you okay?" Isabella asked her softly, and gave Lily's arm a gentle squeeze.
It took a bit of effort to get the words out, but Lily assured her that she wasn’t upset, merely overwhelmed by the reality of where she was, and that Isabella had been kind enough to give her the window seat, and that she’d spied swimming pools in so many gardens when the plane began its descent.

*Swimming pools.* In everyday gardens. One would *never* see such a thing in Britain, save for when the masses got their paddling pools out for summer barbecues, and that wasn't even close to the same thing.

"So, you’re happy, then?" said Isabella tentatively.

Lily let out a shaky giggle in response, wiping tears from her rapidly reddening eyes. "I’m incandescent, I swear."

Rita, James, Euphemia, Remus, and Sirius had all flown in first class while the girls sat in economy with the rest of the crew, and therefore weren't present to witness her blubbing, for which she was grateful. The last thing she wanted was for James to assume that she'd been shedding tears on his account.

He probably wouldn’t assume that because he wasn’t a conceited ass, though Rita certainly would.

Upon disembarking the plane and exiting the airport, the girls were bundled into a car with blacked-out windows—against which Lily basically pressed her nose for the entire journey—and whisked to the center of Paris, and the most decadent hotel she had ever stepped foot inside in her life.

It was all immensely exciting, until Rita informed them that they weren't allowed to leave.

"You'll have free reign of the facilities **inside** the hotel for the duration of your stay," said Rita gaily, from beneath her obscenely clichéd beret, "including the fitness center, should any of you feel like toning up."

Lily responded to this generous offer by telling Rita to fuck off, which might have been why she wound up in a room overlooking the hotel car park.

It was ridiculous that they weren’t allowed to venture outside the hotel. James was under Rita's ever watchful eye, so there was no danger of bumping into him in a corridor. Lily certainly wasn’t of a mind to seek him out after their scene at her mum's, especially when the alternative was the entire city of Paris. He’d been put up in the "fantasy suite," a cringe-inducing name for a penthouse with no cameras or microphones inside, poised to offer keys to the women he fancied spending a night alone with.

It was deeply shameful, but the idea of James spending the night with Isabella—kissing her and holding her, and everything else that went with a romantic night in a luxury suite, unmonitored and unchaperoned—turned Lily's stomach inside out, but only when the thought occurred to her.

The thought occurred to her frequently.

Constantly, in fact, when Bonnie was taken away for yet another date and Lily and Isabella were left to fend for themselves in the hotel. Isabella was in a rather low mood and asked Lily to spend the evening exercising with her, posing the question so sweetly that Lily didn't have the heart to turn her down, lest she feel like she'd drowned a kitten.

Down to the gym they went. Isabella perked up considerably, but Lily spent her time enduring boiling, bubbling feelings of jealousy and confusion that reared up in her gut whenever she looked
at her friend's beautiful, smiling face.

She couldn't reconcile her brain with the idea that James could genuinely believe he and Isabella were suited, that he wouldn't get bored, and that he wouldn't swamp her, even if he didn't intend to.

Then again, that was probably her jealousy attempting to rationalize her objection to their relationship. Without Beatrice there to speak aloud the thoughts that Lily kept tightly under wraps, she had nothing to do but examine her own motives for viewing them through such a negative lens, and it made her feel wretchedly selfish.

It wasn't in her nature to be so envious of others, but her feelings didn't seem to have an off switch. It hadn't been this bad before they'd gone to Cokeworth, before she had been forced to accept that it wasn't just a harmless crush she was fostering, and that it wasn't going to slip away unseen with any haste.

God, she'd only gone and fallen for the bloody bachelor, and that made her even more of a cliché than Rita's sodding beret.

The next morning, she was roused by a sharp rapping on her bedroom door, and a breezy, familiar voice calling, "Housekeeping!"

She scrambled hastily out of bed and answered it to find Euphemia Potter on the other side, dressed in her Parisian best and clutching a brown paper bag, from which a mouth-watering aroma was emanating.

"Good morning, dear," said Euphemia warmly, as if it was a very normal thing to knock on someone's door and pretend to be a maid. "How did you sleep? Well, I hope?"

"Um," said Lily.

"I thought you'd like to eat something scrumptious before you get ready," Euphemia continued, unperturbed by Lily's failure to produce an adequate response to her question, "so I've brought you some breakfast."

Lily shifted her weight to one foot, going slack against the door. Her tired, overworked body was aching from the weight training Isabella had put her through.

"Get ready?" she sleepily repeated. "I'm not on camera today, am I?"

"No, dear, my son has a date with Isabella today."

"I didn't need the reminder, but thank you."

Euphemia let out a tinkling laugh. "What I mean to say is that I'd like to take you out on a little excursion in the city this morning, if you're willing. No cameras, and no Rita. I know how frustrating it must be for you to stay cooped up in this hotel."

Lily's heart gave a leap at the words "excursion in the city" and several more at "no cameras, and no Rita."

"Are you—" She stood up straight. "Just me, or the other girls, too?"

"Just you, dear."

The scent of hot, buttery pastry was filling the air around Lily's head like a thick, fragrant cloud.
"Why?" she said after a beat, frowning.

"Oh, I think you know why," said Euphemia, and held out the paper bag for Lily to take. "I'll just give you some time to get ready, shall I? Meet me down in the foyer. I'll have transportation ready."

Common sense told Lily to refuse her, because she did know why she had been singled out. Almost from the beginning of the competition, Euphemia had made it perfectly clear that, regardless of what James wanted, Lily was her choice of girlfriend for him. Her offer, whilst kind, felt a little too much like an incentive to keep Lily interested in her son.

If it was an incentive, that made as little sense as James's hearty efforts to win over her mother. He was the one who didn't want to be with her, not the other way around.

In any case, Euphemia had already turned and walked off without waiting for an answer. Lily knew that she was powerless to resist such a golden opportunity to escape the hotel, and the sharp, controlling talons of Rita Skeeter.

Paris, she thought, and slunk back into her room to shower and eat her breakfast. Paris, she thought, while she rode down in the elevator, feeling like a dirty politician who had taken a bribe in a brown envelope—only in this case, it was a brown paper bag, and the bribe a freshly baked pain au chocolat. Paris, she thought, when Euphemia's transportation turned out to be, not a car, but an ostentatious silver carriage drawn by two large, beautiful cremello horses.

"So you can see the sights unencumbered by streaky glass windows," Euphemia explained, "and travel the city in style."

Seriously, Lily reflected. The Potters lived on a different planet to the one she inhabited.

"The mother of the guy I fancy is taking me on a romantic date around Paris," she said, blinking at the stomping horses, the lush velvet seats, the champagne bottle chilling in an ice bucket in the carriage. "That's not porn site territory at all."

"I do enjoy your sense of humor, dear," said Euphemia, and pushed her gently towards a waiting footman. "Hop in."

Lily had no real choice but to comply.

Once they were both seated and comfortable, and the horses moved off, Euphemia immediately produced a phone and offered it up for the taking of photographs. She promised she would forward them to Lily's email address on the condition that she join her in many selfies over the course of the morning.

"Sirius taught me the art of the selfie, you see," she said, tilting her chin down, and sucked in her cheeks, her lips pursing into a duck-like pout.

"Selfie-taking is a talent of his, is it?"

"He's got quite a knack for working angles."

"I imagine he spends many hours practicing."

"He would argue that beauty isn't a practiced art, but a natural state of being, achievable only by few," said Euphemia cheerily.
"And yet he feels the need to work his angles to take a good photo."

Lily didn’t add that Sirius may have wanted to work on his inner beauty a bit more.

"Where would you like to go today?" said Euphemia, after a few moments of silence. "We're quite close to the Palais-Royal and the Louvre, and I need to pop into Dior later for a quick something —"

Pop into Dior, Lily reflected, much amused. As if that were a casual activity. Lily bought her clothes in Primark, where she could get shoes for £8 and a five-pack of socks for a couple of quid. Euphemia Potter could pop into Dior.

"—but this is your party, dear, so speak up if there's anything you'd really like to do," Euphemia finished, then paused, looking thoughtful. "The only thing I really can't show you is the Eiffel Tower."

Their carriage turned on to a wide bridge, its wheels rumbling as it bounced across the cobblestones beneath.

"I see," said Lily blankly, gazing out across the Seine. "I guess that's tomorrow's date destination out of the bag."

"That transparent, am I?"

"I wouldn't worry too much, it seemed inevitable that one of us would end up going there." Lily turned her head and looked at her. "James really hates France, you know."

"I'm quite aware of his many quirks and absurdities."

"I suppose he didn't take too kindly to flying here?"

"There may have been a minor tantrum at the airport," said Euphemia, with a knowing smile.

"That boy," Lily sighed, and tried to sound exasperated, but it came out wrong, and fond, and terribly, shamefully soft to her ears. "He should have known he'd wind up here. I told him before that there was no imagination at work on this show. Where else were they going to bring us, some other random city that isn't known for being a bastion of romance?"

"I'd call that proof, if more was needed, that my son should heed your excellent advice whenever possible."

"Everyone should heed my advice," said Lily absently, already regretting bringing up James. Thinking of him made her chest hurt a little. "Do you think we could go to the Louvre, if we're close? I'm an absolute sucker for a good museum."

"I'll give you the Louvre in exchange for three selfies," said Euphemia. "Five, and I'll buy us audio guides."

That was too good a deal to pass up.

The museum was as grandiose and beautiful as every photo she'd ever seen had instructed her to assume, and Lily's heart kicked up a notch when she stepped out of the carriage and took it all in. As promised, Euphemia purchased the audio guides, and endured Lily's desire to stop and listen to everything they could with great patience.
"I've never seen anyone so excited to be in a gallery," she remarked, as they were wandering through a hall of 18th century European pastels.

"I know," said Lily, with a laugh. "I half-expected some staid French security guard to come up and tell me to stop making heart-eyes at the Venus de Milo."

"Is art a passion of yours?"

"Honestly, I can barely draw a stick figure," Lily admitted, and pointed to a portrait of a woman in a huge powdered wig, "but look at that. Someone was able to sit down and create something that beautiful with their bare hands, and I find that fascinating." She paused. "I'm always fascinated by other people's talents. I've got a friend, Alice, who did illustration at the Cardiff Met, and the things she can do with just a pen and paper are incredible."

"James has always been very good at art," said Euphemia idly. "Drawing, and such. I've even framed some of it in the house."

"Does he draw much?"

"Not so much now, I think. Doesn't have the time, he says."

"Then he should make time," said Lily, her gaze fixed on the powdered wig woman. "It'd be a shame to waste a talent like that."

"You should tell him as much."

"Perhaps I will." She stretched out a hand towards Euphemia. "Can I nab your phone again?"

Euphemia's phone was passed between the two of them so often that quickly started to feel as if they were playing a very strange game of pass the parcel. Lily was intent on snapping pictures of the exhibitions, as well as the general splendor of the Louvre and its surroundings, while Euphemia was more interested in taking photos of Lily in various poses. She exceeded her five selfie limit in about as many minutes.

After they left the gallery, they strolled through the pyramid and marveled at an incredible golden throne made by a Japanese sculptor, sipped cappuccinos at a café nearby, then it was back to the carriage, where Lily was gently nudged into a glass of crisp champagne before they made a start for Dior.

"I'm having a really lovely time," she said happily, snuggling into her seat.

"It's fun to get away from the menfolk for a while," Euphemia agreed, as the carriage rumbled towards the Galeries Lafayette, wherein, Lily had been informed, lay their next destination. "You know all about our difficulties in conceiving, of course."

"I did manage to glean that," Lily replied, "amongst all the talk about banging."

Fixated, he was.

That said, James hadn't been the one admitting to having sex dreams on camera, so he had Lily beat in that department. It was somewhat embarrassing to think that Euphemia knew about that.

"It's a painful thing, wanting a child so much, and believing you'll never have one," Euphemia continued, her words coming out on a sigh.
"I’m very glad you did, in the end."

"Oh, James has been beyond a blessing—"

That was one word for it.

"—but I have always longed for a daughter," Euphemia finished, and gave Lily’s hand a gentle pat. "In that vein, dear, I’m quite grateful to you for indulging me today."

"Oh, sure, it was my pleasure," said Lily, wondering why Euphemia thought she was the one being indulged when it was Lily who had been thoroughly spoiled and petted.

Upon stepping inside Dior, Lily wasn't remotely surprised to find that the staff were quite familiar with her companion.

They were immediately accosted by a polished blonde woman named Camille, who greeted Euphemia by name, kissed her on both cheeks, and drew her into conversation in rapid French. Lily had picked up a few key phrases from Bonnie, but they were speaking so quickly that she didn't have much of a clue of what they were saying.

"Now, Camille," said Euphemia smartly, after they'd finished exclaiming over whatever had excited them so much. She laid one of her hands on Lily's shoulder. "This is the girl."

Camille cocked an enquiring eyebrow at Lily. "The girl?"

"The girl."

"Of course, who else would she be?" said Camille with a fluttering laugh, and held out her hand for Lily to take. "Come."

Lily looked at Euphemia. "What?"

Euphemia merely smiled, a smug smile that said things like you've been thoroughly had, congratulations, and mwah ha ha, my dastardly plans have come to pass.

Thus, Lily found herself being led boldly across the shop floor and into a room in the back, where yet another glass of champagne was pressed into her hand almost immediately. Euphemia followed her and Camille inside, beaming, and sank elegantly into an armchair while her accomplice skittered away behind a tall partition. Camille emerged a moment later with her arms full of floaty red chiffon.

"It's a dress!" Euphemia announced, quite unnecessarily, as there was nothing it could be but a dress, and a stunning one at that. "I've never seen you in red, dear, and I do think it would suit you if you'd like to try it on."

Lily stared blankly at her for a moment.

Euphemia stared unblinkingly back.

Camille draped the dress over one arm and fluffed out the skirt with a flourish.

"Please," said Lily, after a beat of silence, "tell me that you're not trying to buy me a dress."

"What do you mean, trying?" said Euphemia. "I don't need to buy you this dress. It's yours. I've already commissioned it."
"You commissioned it?"

"I don't know why you're so surprised, dear. I do it all the time. Every suit that James has worn on the show was tailored especially for him."

That explained why James's suits fit him so bloody well and why he always looked so…but Lily wasn't going to get distracted by stupid lustful stirrings in this time of crisis.

"That's a completely different situation," she retorted, and pointed at the dress as if she was about to curse its firstborn. "James is your son, and I—"

"Saw exactly what he needed, when he needed it, and gave it to him," Euphemia cut in, and rose to her feet, pushing herself up from the armchair with considerable sprightliness for a woman her age, "which I completely failed to do, though I'm his mother. He was utterly miserable until you made him better, and I won't let that kindness go unrewarded."

Euphemia said it like she'd played a winning hand, and the problem was, she had, because she was completely correct in everything she said. Lily could argue Mary's job offer until she was blue in the face, but she knew that wasn't why let their argument by the river veer so off course. She'd done it because cared about James, more than she should have and more than was good for her, even then, before she'd ever comprehended the scope of what she felt for him.

"I didn't do it for a reward," she argued weakly.

Euphemia slanted a motherly smile at her. "People with good hearts rarely do."

"Well, thank you, but be that as it may," said Lily, feeling very warm, "I can't reciprocate on this level, so I really don't know if I should be trying that on."

"If you're worried about the fit, there's no need. I sent your measurements ahead of time."

"How did they get my—" Lily began, then let out a huff of air, her shoulders dropping with the realization. "Our photoshoot costumes." Euphemia had been present for the fittings. "Of course."

Euphemia tapped the side of her nose, eyes twinkling mischievously. "If you've quite finished objecting for the minute, could you pop into the changing room and try it on, please?"

There wasn't any way to politely refuse after such profuse compliments. Five minutes later saw Lily modeling the Very Expensive Red Dress—which was light and girlish and flowing, and popped against her pale skin in a rather lovely way she hadn't been expecting—in front of a tall mirror. Euphemia delighted in snapping pictures of her from every angle she could conceive of.

"Beautiful. Didn't I tell you?" she said delightedly, circling around her like a benevolent shark.

"It is pretty," Lily owned.

"Don't be so modest, dear, we haven't the time for it."

Lily sighed, and smoothed down the front of the gown, which really was beautiful, easily the most beautiful garment she'd ever worn. It made her feel like a Disney princess, though she'd never confess to such a thing out loud. "I love it, honestly, but I don't go to events that require formal gowns like this. I'll never have a reason to wear it."

"Nonsense," said Euphemia. "You can wear it to the ballet tonight."
Lily turned around at once, her gauzy skirts spinning out around her in a scarlet flurry, like they'd caught a sudden breeze, and was immediately glad that she hadn't been forced into something tight and restrictive.

"The ballet?" she repeated, her eyes wide with disbelief.

"Didn't I mention?" Euphemia set her champagne glass on a tall, ornate stool and smiled coyly. "Box seats, the best in the house. Sadly, I won't be able to come with you as I'm somewhat busy, but—"

"I can't go to the ballet," said Lily flatly.

"Why can't you?"

"Because—" she began, and hesitated. Euphemia crooked an eyebrow at her. "Because it's too much, all of this. I can't afford box seats at the ballet, so I can't pay you back, and I don't think—"

"I don't want you to pay me back. It's my treat."

"But you don't have to treat me," Lily protested, her cheeks boiling with embarrassment. "Buy yourself something, or save your money, I don't need—"

"The tickets are already paid for, dear."

"That's really not the poi—"

"And besides," Euphemia continued, as if Lily hadn't raised a single objection to her scheme, "I've already secured you an escort for the evening."

Despite her better claims to self-respect, and despite knowing that James already had plans with Isabella, Lily's heart leapt into her throat anyway. "An escort?"

"Yes, dear. Sirius is quite eager to catch the ballet while we're in the city."

She felt a hard, clunking disappointment in the pit of her stomach. Then she almost laughed out loud.

Sirius Black. And her. And a stupidly expensive dress that cost about the same as a week of groceries for an entire street in Dagenham. Spending an evening at the Paris ballet.

Rarely in her life had Lily heard a suggestion so utterly absurd.

"The hosts aren't allowed to be alone with us," Lily pointed out, that handy sliver of information springing into her head. She almost added a triumphant Hah! but decided against it.

"Sirius has never been one to heed nonsensical orders, and I'd wager you're rather alike in that regard."

"Rita would never sign off on it."

"Of course she wouldn't, which is why she hasn't been informed. She'll be otherwise occupied by the time you need to leave, accompanying my son and I on his date," said Euphemia. "I know he's not the escort you want, but Sirius will be a perfect gentleman, I assure you. Hands to himself at all times."
"It's not his hands I'm worried about," Lily muttered darkly, thinking of the mileage Sirius would get from taking Lily out for the evening while the guy she really wanted was gallivanting around the city of lights with the girl of his dreams. She was not equipped to deal with that kind of teasing after everything that had happened in Cokeworth.

Then again, Sirius wasn't exactly thrilled about James and Isabella.

He'd given her that book, too—his book, if the name and annotations scrawled within the pages of Anna Karenina were any indication. He had several very strong, and very negative, opinions on Count Vronsky.

Euphemia must have favored the way Lily's downturned mouth and furrowed brow worked with the Very Expensive Red Dress, because she held her phone aloft and snapped another none-too-subtle picture.

She must have taken enough to fill a few albums.

Knowing Euphemia as Lily thought she did, she'd probably make an album of the photos and post the thing, elegantly wrapped and tied up with a bow, to Lily's mum in Cokeworth, complete with pithy, hand-written captions. Lily trying on a dress. Lily objecting to needless expense. Lily mooning like a sap over my only son.

Lily knew she'd be a bit of an idiot if she turned down box seats at the ballet in favor of a night in a hotel room, watching dubbed American sitcoms on the television, brewing tasteless teas with the tiny pods of milk they left alongside the biscuits—never quite enough to make a satisfactory cup—while she ate her heart out over a bleeding boy, of all things.

Beatrice loved the ballet. She'd kill her if she didn't go.

And refuse to live with her, probably.

"The tickets are definitely paid for already?" she asked Euphemia.

Euphemia nodded, her white hair gleaming like freshly fallen snow in the flattering overhead lights. "Bought, paid for, and doomed to go to waste, if you're not inclined to take them."

God, but the woman was wily, appealing to Lily's working-class distaste for squandering funds.

She shrugged, admitting defeat with a twitch of her shoulders. "I do hate to waste money, I suppose."

"And I admire your good sense just as much," said Euphemia happily. "You'll consent to go, then?"

"I suppose I'll only regret it if I don't."

"Wonderful." Euphemia waved, queen-like, in the direction of Camille, who practically sprang across the polished floor to rejoin them. "I'll have the carriage pick you up at seven."

After their romantic dinner, James was supposed to offer Bonnie the keys to the fantasy suite if he wanted.

He pulled them out of his pocket up and dangled them over the table. "Somehow," he said, half smiling, "I get the sense you're not dying for these."

He thought she'd laugh, or at the very least smile. Instead she swallowed, and looked down into
her wine. "I know who you really want to take in there." She took a large sip of wine and shook her head. "But in any case, you’re right. I’m looking forward to luxuriating in my hotel room robe and slippers while I watch Amelie."

"Good choice," he said, and they clinked glasses for the last time.

He ended up copying Bonnie’s idea by turning on Amelie, settling into the terrifically comfortable suite bed by himself. Bonnie was probably having a better time of it, though. James barely ended up taking in any of the movie, too busy agonizing over how his date with Isabella would go.

Although it was fuzzy around the edges, his drunken monologue to Algernon wasn’t entirely gone from his memory. He did know where his heart was pointing him, even if it was swinging a bit like a compass needle settling in.

The thing was, he just needed to be absolutely sure of his choice. He had another chance to hang around with Isabella the next day, but if it went like he thought it would...well. That would settle it.

And then he’d have his one opportunity to let her down in private, rather than in front of the ever-present cameras, when she joined him in the fantasy suite.

It would be a terribly shocking turn for her, of course, and dead cruel since she’d have nothing but positive, fun expectations when they entered the room...but it was better than giving her no warning at all before the final episode.

As it turned out, he was not the only one reading his compass needle.

"The catacombs?" he said when he got out of the car the next afternoon. "You’ve no subtlety at all," he told Rita. "Have you no sense of artistry?"

"Think of the dramatic lighting," she said in a wry voice. "Fitting tone for your romance, no?"

"I could still pick her," he said under his breath.

"I don’t care who you pick so long as you stick to the terms and don’t tell either of them what you’re going to do in the finale."

He was absolutely not going to follow those terms but she’d never know. Only Isabella would.

Dear, sweet Isabella, who practically flung herself into his arms when she arrived.

"You alright there?" he asked, gently prying himself loose from her. "It’s only been a few days."

She rested her hands on his upper arms, looking up at him, a tense energy in her lithe frame. "I know," she said. "I know, I know, only…"

He quirked his eyebrows. "Right. I’m going to fill in the blank there with I missed you, but I realize that might be a bit presumptuous."

"No," she said quickly. "No. That’s it. You always know what I mean."

She really was stunningly pretty, even when surrounded by literal death and despair, and exuded such a pure goodness.

He took her hands in his own, and let them hang down by their sides. "How’ve you been doing since, you know. Er. Our last date."
She buried her face into his chest. "I don’t...I don’t want to talk about it."

"Right. Totally fine. No issue at all. Forget I asked." He dropped a kiss on top of her head, feeling rather brotherly as he did so. "So. Ready to get nightmare fodder for the next ten years?"

She continued to cling to him throughout their tour, but that might’ve been spurred by the horrific number of skulls they’d seen, and the way the damp air chilled to the bone. She didn’t speak much either, but again, it wasn’t like he expected ribald commentary from her about several million dead bodies surrounding them on all sides. He tried to lighten the mood with some sly comments but gave up after his fourth failed attempt.

Curse Rita and her ability to absolutely slaughter a mood.

Isabella did brighten up after they returned to the earth’s surface, where humans properly belonged, but the cuddling persisted. Even once they’d been seated in a private nook at a highly-exclusive restaurant—typical French snobbery—she held his hand over the table until their salads arrived.

"The bodies really got to you, eh?" he said.

"Hm?" she said, idly dragging her fork tines through the dressing on the plate. She stopped and looked up at him. "Oh. Yes. That wasn’t...that wasn’t exactly what I pictured for my first date in Paris."

"I pictured myself spontaneously combusting the next time I passed into French airspace, but sadly neither of us got what we wanted."

She did smile now, but thinly. "You really do hate the French."

"They think a grand tourist attraction is to take people through a room covered in human skulls."

"And a bridge covered in locks meant to represent a couple’s love," she pointed out.

"Nah, they had to take those all down because the weight was too much for the bridge. Idiots."

The smile dropped off her face. "Oh."

"The city, I meant. Not the people who put the locks on."

"No, I—I know what you meant."

She was staring down at her plate again, much too forlorn considering they’d seen dead bodies but not the massacres themselves.

Where had that girl who’d demanded the boater hat gone?

He knew, of course. She’d been smothered under the heel of her parents’ low opinion. And being in France was surely not helping. It was a country full of arrogant pricks, and sweet Isabella would never fit in with them.

But that punting girl was there. She was buried and squashed but she was there—he’d seen her.

"So," he said. "Er. What’re your goals for life? Like, traveling or career or whatever?"

She met his gaze but tilted her head, a line between her eyebrows.

"I figured we should, ah. Talk about it sometime," he said. "It seems...relevant."
"Oh. Alright." She studied her salad, deep in thought for the length of time it took her to consume several crunchy bites. "I don't know," she finally said.

"Come on." He offered an encouraging smile. "You must have something. Like, d'you want kids?"

"Oh," she said, delight spreading across her face, like he'd asked if she'd like to play in a pen with a dozen kittens. "I do want kids, absolutely. No question about it."

He pointed at her with his fork. "There, see? A goal. A nice one, at that." After another bite of food, he asked, "Anything else on your general life to-do list?"

Her mouth parted slightly, but then she clamped her mouth shut. She very deliberately set her fork and knife onto her plate and pushed it toward the candle at the center of the table.

"You’ve definitely got more," he told her. "What is it?"

She shook her head very slightly but very quickly.

"Please," he said. "No goal is stupid. Even if it's, like, pole vaulting or something. You get to pick your own goals, you know."

She laughed sadly, tucking her hands together in her lap. "No, it's not about pole vaulting. That I actually think I might manage."

He placed his forearms on the table, one crossed over the other. "Then what is it about? Archery? Canoeing? If so, you've really lucked out and got to practice on the show."

"No, it's...it’s stupid, actually."

"I promise it isn't." He kept looking at her, willing her to drag her attention up from the flickering candle, but she was persistent. "Look," he went on, "whatever it is you want to do...I think you can do it. Unless you want to become, like, an astronaut. Even though we’re not thirty I have a feeling we’re probably too old to start on that path."

She brought her hands up to the table, where she rubbed one thumb with her other thumb and forefinger. After appearing to pinch herself, she pressed her lips together. "It's...well."

"Yeah?" he said softly.

She pressed her palms flat down onto the table and took a deep breath. "I’d like to open my own fitness center someday."

"That's brilliant!" he said with a grin. "You definitely should."

Her shoulders slumped. "Only I don't know anything about running a business, or managing, or anything like that, so it probably won’t happen."

He leaned forward, reaching across the table to pick up her hand and squeeze it. "Maybe you don’t now, but you can learn how to do it, yeah? People do that all the time. My dad didn't have a degree in business or anything but he figured it out. Now look at him."

"Right, but...your dad is so clever."

"And so are you."

His mates never needed this sort of encouragement, this sort of directness. They were blokes who
preferred strong elbow jabs as a show of emotional support. Except Remus, but he tended to play this role for James, and almost never vice versa.

It was nice to play this role, actually. It was so simple: she needed to hear it, and he could tell her.

Isabella met his gaze, her eyebrows drawn together, looking rather pained. "You’re so kind to me, James, and I don’t—I don’t deserve it."

"You do, though. Not because you’re a good person—which you absolutely are, let me be clear—but because everyone deserves to be treated well."

From the start she'd made him feel comfortable. She'd made him feel accepted and trusted and capable. And that was the magic of Isabella, who had not nearly enough kindness for herself, but a surfeit for everyone else.

He’d been so clear with her this whole time that she was the one, that he'd have no other and would ultimately choose her. Even when she'd been jealous of Lily, he'd reassured her. It had been true at the time, of course. He hadn't lied about it or anything, it was just…

Things had changed. He’d got to know her better. He'd got to know Lily better. And Isabella…

She wasn't the one for him. She was wonderful and kind and sweet, but he didn't feel a thrill every time he saw her. He didn't have to stay on his toes, trying to keep up with her. He didn't struggle to find new ways to entertain her, not because she demanded it, but because he wanted to.

She wasn't demanding in any positive or negative sense. If he got together with Isabella, he'd stay the same. They'd get married and have kids and he'd try to talk her out of Sunday dinners with her family. She might get him to try yoga or something, but not much beyond that. They'd sit and watch Arsenal matches and have the same opinions.

He’d told Lily he didn't know what he wanted beyond marriage and family. This, again, had not been a lie at the time.

But he did know, now.

He knew that he wanted the sort of relationship he had with Lily. With someone who'd sussed him out from the get-go, with someone who'd give him fries when he needed it, but also a piece of her mind.

That brilliant, clever, cheeky mind.

No, he didn’t want to be with Isabella that way. They could be friends, yeah, but that was about it. Surely she’d come to see the sense of that in the end.

He just had to get her into the fantasy suite as soon as possible to get this over with.

They moved onto other topics during their too-fancy dinner. Honestly, everything was so dressed up and Presented in Artistic Ways that he didn’t even know what he was eating half the time. He wasn’t about to give the French what they wanted and ask what nonsense they’d made. Instead he ate what tasted good—which was to say, very little—and left the rest on his plate.

After a dessert that James could both identify and enjoy despite its origins—creme brulee—he took hold of Isabella’s hand across the table.

It was time to start the hard part.
Christ, it was going to be miserable to make this woman unhappy.

He took a deep breath and steeled himself. This was for the best.

"Isabella Marks," he said, forcing himself to make eye contact. "Would you join me in the fantasy suite?"

She looked back at him, her brown eyes wide, candlelight playing across her face.

Her lips pressed together.

A furrow formed on her brow.

She swallowed, looked past him, and said, "I'm sorry."

He stared at her.

Then he checked over his shoulder—no threatening Rita or anything besides Bozo there—and looked back at her.

"Er," he said. "Is that...a no?"

"Yes," she said, gripping his hand tightly. "I mean, yes it's a no, and I can't—I'm so, so sorry."

Agonized was not the expression he’d hoped to inspire in her tonight. Not yet, anyway. Maybe after the whole "I'm sorry I prefer Lily" bit, but that would really induce more hurt than agony, than looking torn as she did now.

"Ah," he said, feeling rather like the chair had been pulled out from beneath him. "I...I see." He shook his head and brought his other hand up to surround hers on both sides. "No, that’s a lie, I don’t—please," he said. "I just—I would really, really like it if you'd come in. For like. A bit, even." He swallowed. "Please."

She shook her head furiously and slipped her hand out of her grip. "I can't," she said. "I can't."

She shoved her chair back and flew out of her seat, her long hair trailing behind her as she disappeared out of their private room.

He kept watching the door where she’d gone, like she’d come back any second.

Surely Rita would force her to go into the suite. After all, the reversal of choice at the end would play better if they implied Isabella at least made out with him first.

But Isabella didn’t come back.

The door stayed shut.

A low whistle came from behind him.

He turned around to see Bozo shaking his head and standing up, head away from his camera.

"Wow," said Bozo. "Didn’t see that coming."

This, James felt, as he had the horrifying realization that he’d have no more private chances to reveal his intentions to Isabella, was rather an understatement.
It transpired that Euphemia had been mistaken, because Sirius Black could not keep his hands to himself.

That was less of a problem for Lily, and more an issue for the good people of Paris, to whom he persisted in waving grandly from the carriage like he was a foreign dignitary on an official visit.

Lily tried to get him to stop—whilst laughing, which hurt her cause—but Sirius merely redoubled his efforts and instructed her to "wave to the peasants, they have so little to enjoy."

He was also genuinely chuffed to be attending the ballet, which was a showcase performance from a highly esteemed dance company that Beatrice probably would have known about, though Lily had never heard of them before.

"I wouldn’t have bothered coming if I hadn’t wanted to, not even for Euphemia," Sirius explained as they took their promised box seats, indicating to his neatly-pressed tuxedo, "nor would I have dressed up. You’re a knockout in that dress, by the way."

He wasn’t wrong there, but Lily sighed heavily anyway. "I know you think it’s funny to get fresh—"

"On my honor, it was a perfectly innocent compliment," he cut in, and whipped a pair of opera glasses from an inside pocket. "I prefer my women a little less classy, and besides, you seem like too much work."

"Work?"

"That’s what I said."

"What do you mean, ’work?’"

"I mean you seem like one of those girls who’d do nice things for a bloke you were seeing," he said, sounding half-bored, already scanning the crowd with his opera glasses, "like cooking, or taking care of them when they’re sick, or supporting their dreams, and then I’d need to do nice things back and just...nah." He waved a dismissive hand. "Too much effort."

"That’s—" She groped around for something to be offended about, and came up empty-handed. "That’s a strangely nice compliment, actually."

He shrugged, then handed her the glasses, pointing at something on the other side of the theatre. "That bloke over there is picking his nose."

"What?"

"Eighth row of the stalls, right by the wall. Blue suit."

Lily raised the glasses to her eyes and scanned the crowd until she found the culprit, who looked to be on a very determined excavation mission.

"Oh, God," she said, pulling a face. "Oh, Jesus. And in public? Holy shit."

"Nose-pickers drive you to blaspheme? What kind of Irishwoman are you?"

"What do you think he’s looking for up there?" she asked, and Sirius snorted. "His car keys? His wallet?"

"His dignity?"
"Somebody ought to tell Rita," said Lily seriously. "That is a prime candidate for bachelorhood next year if ever I saw one."

That set Sirius to laughing in earnest.

It turned out that her companion could be wonderful, witty company when he set his mind to being amiable. He was genuinely interested in the event, and knew a lot of fascinating facts about the ballet that he would share with her as they applauded between performances.

The dancing was as beautiful as she could have hoped, though Lily found herself fidgeting a little by the end of the night and enjoying the music—which was so often emotive and moving—much more. Her hand never seemed to be without a glass of something bubbly and delightful, and it seemed only polite to indulge.

She also met several pretentious gits during intermission, which gave her and Sirius the chance to laugh heartily at all the pretentious gits when they took their seats for the second act.

All things considered, it was one of the better nights out that Lily had ever experienced. She left the theatre drunkenly convinced that she loved Euphemia Potter dearly, and would hug her tight at the next available opportunity.

The hotel was so close that they walked back after the ballet, with a champagne-plied Lily taking the lead, having taken her heels off and launched into a series of slightly unsteady twirls and skips.

"I reckon I could be a ballerina," she called over her shoulder, bouncing on her bare feet, her shoes swinging haphazardly from where she'd hooked the straps on two fingers. "I mean, very very possibly, if I wasn't nearly thirty."

"Yes, you're a real paragon of grace," said Sirius dryly.

Lily ignored him, humming under her breath, engrossed in pulling off her debut ballet performance with no formal training, and trying to avoid stepping on wayward stones and rubbish. Sirius had taken his phone out and was subtly filming her in the hopes that she'd fall over, and he obviously thought she hadn't noticed, but she had.

She didn't care. She was drunk in Paris, and she looked incredible in her fancy new dress. Several strangers had told her as much at the theatre, and that might have had something to do with the fact that Sirius kept introducing her as the Duchess of Winchester, but she figured she had charms enough to merit some genuine admiration.

"I'd probably fall prettily," she murmured.

"What was that?"

"I said I'd probably fall prettily," she repeated loudly, and spun in a circle. "I am pretty, y'know. I know that. No point pretending I don't so people will tell me all the time."

"Funny," said Sirius, "you share my principles on the matter."

"James tried to tell me, this one time. He was like, you're obviously super gorgeous, and I was like, I know, you clown." She’d thought about that moment a lot since. "What did that old bloke tell me during intermission?"

"Comme tu es belle."
"Comme tu es belle," she echoed. "Can you speak French?"

"I'm not fluent, but I manage."

"Languages weren't my thing at school. Except for English, but you don't learn that like a language because it's about opinions and stuff." She paused, considering this. "It worries me, that does. I think I should learn how to speak to people I meet when I go traveling next year, but I'm going to so many countries that it seems impossible, and I'm so crap at languages and that's a problem, y'know?"

"I don't think the residents of Ho Chi Minh City are going to take offence if you can't speak Vietnamese."

"But that's the thing, I want to go to these places and learn all about the culture, but I don't want to go there knowing nothing and accidentally offend anyone, so like, I keep thinking I should learn it all first, but then what do I learn while I'm there? And do people mind if I ask questions? I wanted to ask Euphemia about India but I didn't know if I'd offend—"

"You wouldn't. She and Fleamont go there a few times a year, and they're cool about—"

"Wait," she said, halting in her tracks. She turned to face Sirius and held one hand up to stay him, even though he'd also stopped walking. "Wait, wait, wait. James's dad is called Fleamont?"

"Yup."

"That's..." She caught herself. It would be humiliating if she was outrageously insensitive right after talking about her fear of her own ignorance. "That's not an Indian name, right?"

"Nah, it's a 'fuck knows' name."

"But that's..." Her jaw dropped. "Who would do that to an innocent baby?"

"Par for the course with that family," said Sirius, shrugging. He dropped his phone to waist height, evidently bored of filming her, and started to scroll through something. "James obviously hasn't told you what his middle name is."

"What's his middle name?"

Sirius shook his head. "Couldn't possibly share that, Evans. It's his deepest, darkest secret and he takes it far too seriously to fuck around. He'd be furious if I told you what it is. Even Remus and Pete don't know."

Lily didn't know who Pete was, or rather vaguely thought she might have. "Tell me."

"No."

"Tell me."

"Oh no, what a hard line of questioning you've taken," said Sirius, speaking in monotone. "I have no choice but to crack."

"Well, why even bring it up, if you're going to leave me hanging like that? I deserve to have something to make fun of after what he's put me through. This is inordinate cruelty and I won't stand for it," she protested, and briefly considering stamping her foot to emphasize her point, but remembered she was barefoot just in time.
"Christ," said Sirius, with a derisive snicker. "You sound just like him when he’s having a fit over noth—"

He stopped talking. Frowned down at his phone.

Then he threw back his head and let out a sharp, ringing bark of a laugh, followed by several more, his shoulders shaking, waxy white throat exposed to the air.

"What?" said Lily, completely nonplussed, when he eventually calmed down enough to start typing. "What’s so funny?"

"Text from Remus," he said, still shortling as he tapped out a response. "James offered Marks the keys to the fantasy suite, but she turned them down and took off."

Lily's stomach gave a quick, raucous leap, and she was seized by a mad urge to cackle like a supervillain.

Instead, she forced her hands to her sides, and her face into an unassuming expression.

"I'm sure it's not a big deal," she said airily. "Maybe she’s saving herself for marriage and didn’t want to be tempted."

"Urgh, of course. She seems like the type," said Sirius in disgust, then looked up from his phone with a knowing eyebrow crooked. "You all right, Duchess?"

"There's nothing wrong with waiting—"

"Not in theory, but—"

"Just because you couldn't wait five minutes to jump into bed with Charlene—"

"Deflection, thy name is Evans," Sirius accused, grinning widely. "How are you feeling about this shocking new development? Happy? Excited? I bet you're fucking thrilled."

Lily was happy, in a fickle, fleeting, drunken kind of way that she knew would dissipate when she sobered up and accepted that Isabella's refusal likely had no bearing on her eventual relationship with James. Luckily, she could explain her smile away by referencing the wonderful day she'd just experienced, or by pointing out the comedy in Sirius and Remus having both gotten laid over the course of the competition while the actual bachelor was likely to come out at the end as backed-up as a born-again virgin.

Instead, she opted to lie. "I'm not even thinking about it."

"Aren't you?"

"Not a bit. And as a matter of fact," said Lily, "what I was thinking—halt the presses—is that you're an okay bloke, Sirius Black, and I believe we shall be mates after tonight."

"Mates," said Sirius slowly, his lips pulling to the side, brow furrowing, as if he was giving serious consideration to the full implications of the word. "Does that mean I'll have to help you move or give you lifts to the airport or remember your birthday?"

"No."

"Then I'll take it," he agreed, his free hand extending out towards her. "Mates it is."
"Mates it is," said Lily, and shook on it.

She went to bed that night in an excellent mood and woke up, remarkably fresh, to the news that a mysterious benefactor—obviously Euphemia—had arranged for a morning of pampering in the hotel salon and spa. Lily spent her morning having her face slathered in beautifully-scented creams and being massaged with hot stones into a miniature coma.

The morning’s activities—including a whim-inspired haircut that saw Lily emerge from the salon with several inches gone and soft, loose waves that ended just below her chin—took her all the way to lunch, which she missed because she was pulled aside to prepare for her date.

"I didn’t approve that haircut," Rita said when Lily was brought to her, and practically shoved her into the elevator, "but I don't have time to discuss it. I have to leave and get James shortly, so dress for an active afternoon and be downstairs in an hour to meet the crew."

To Lily's mind, an active afternoon meant shorts, trainers, and the barest amount of makeup she could manage without prompting Rita to lose her mind and attack her with a stick of lipgloss, and that suited her perfectly. She got ready in fifteen minutes, spent the other forty-five eating overpriced peanuts from the minibar, and climbed into the car with her good mood no less diminished.

In a completely unsurprising development, she found herself waiting for James and his usual entourage—his mother, one of his host mates, and a five-man film crew, standard fare for a romantic date, really—at the Eiffel Tower. This was somewhat better than a deer park and infinitely preferable to a hot, stinky, mosquito-infested riverbank.

Minutes later, a sleek black car pulled up a few yards away and Rita emerged with her usual clipboard in hand. She threw a look of deep distaste at the wire mesh fences that surrounded the base of one of the tower legs before stepping aside to let Remus, James, and Euphemia clamber out after her. It was like a chic, Parisian clown car, only not, because Lily hated clowns, whereas she was very fond of three out of four of these people.

James's eyes found hers as soon as he stepped out, his brows raised slightly as if in question. She could tell that he was tentatively trying to gauge her mood, which was fair—she never exactly made things easy for him by withholding her thoughts on camera—but he had nothing to fear from her today. It would have been an insult to her first trip abroad to waste her time being sullen.

She smiled at him, throwing in a cheery wave, and his whole body seemed to relax before he walked over, the cameras already zeroing in on them both.

They were certainly attracting some funny looks from the tourists.

"I see being in France hasn't drained you of your will to live quite yet," she said as he approached her.

He sent her a faint smile, one hand carding through his hair as he took in the sight of her, his eyes lingering. "I was hardly about to let the bastard French drive me to death by baguette."

Lily had a sudden mental image of James being prodded off the plank of a pirate ship by a scurvy cur wielding a large baguette like a sword, and the thought made her laugh.

It really had made her happy to learn that he'd had a good time at pirate golf.

"Look at you, bearing up under great hardship," she said fondly, so he'd know she wasn't making fun of him. "You're like human kevlar, Potter."
"I’ve endured most of this show, which is saying something. Might even be worse than being in France—haven’t decided yet." He nodded at her. "You’ve endured, too, it looks like. I can’t believe the sea witch made you cut your hair."

"Oh." She reached up to finger the ends of her hair, her smile sliding from her face. "Does it not look—no, I decided on this. Thought it would be pretty."

"Oh, shit, sorry. It looks amazing, actually, I just made an assumption like the classic ass."

"I'll give you a pass just this once on account of France, but come on, Potter, you should know better than to think I'd blindly follow her orders."

"I really should’ve known better. Honestly. It’s just…it’s been a weird couple of days. France has put everyone in a mood."

"I'm not in a mood," she pointed out, and paused, tugging her mouth to the side. "I mean, there is a general mood, but that mood is strongly positive. The other day when the plane landed, I was so happy to be here that I actually cried, and I've had, like, so much pain au chocolat, and yesterday was the most magical day you could imagine." She sighed happily. "So, you know, not everyone."

He smiled properly then. "I like seeing you happy. Even if I have to be in France right now to do it."

Her heart rate skyrocketed, a telling warmth spreading all the way from her chest to her face.

A few days ago, Lily would have given him shit for saying things that could so easily be construed as romantic, but that Lily had been pessimistic and jealous and confused, and though she was still jealous and confused, she was also in France. Lily was determined to be fun in France, and James was probably smarting after his date with Isabella and didn’t deserve to have her ire added to the pile.

She didn’t think she’d ever accepted a compliment from James—just accepted it, no questions asked—without being compelled by the urge to come up with a smart remark afterwards.

"Well, that's...thank you," she said, flushed and fluttery and looking anywhere but directly into his eyes because he was smiling at her like he knew how she felt and she was making a fool of herself. "Good. Great. I was actually going to say that I like seeing you happy too, which is why I hope you can be—happy, I mean, at least for today. I know we're in France, but I don't think I'd have any fun if I thought you were miserable."

He ducked his head, but his smile didn’t disappear. "I have...I have a good feeling about today. Or I want to, anyway. Could be self-delusion. That’s definitely happened recently."

"What do you mean—" she began, but she was prevented from questioning further by a gentle clearing of the throat from Remus, who had a special gift for interrupting politely that Lily wished to learn from him.

"I’m very sorry to interrupt what seems to be a lovely chat," he said, stepping forward with a small smile. He looked as dapper as ever in his smart grey suit. Beatrice had snagged a good one. "But perhaps you’d like to know what you’ll be doing today?"

"If anyone on this show knew a single thing about either of us, we’d be queueing for Pirates of the Caribbean in Disneyland right now," said Lily, "but this will do, I suppose."

"Ooh, can we do that instead?" James said. "I'll pay for admission if we can go there right now."
"Unfortunately not," said Remus, grinning, and gestured to the towering structure behind them as if either of them needed any reminder that it was there. "Today, you will be ascending to the second level of the world famous Eiffel Tower before taking a zipline to the bottom and later sampling a selection of cheeses—"

"Wait?" Lily interrupted—impolitely, as she did not have Remus’s gift—her heart leaping into her throat. "Did you just say we're taking a zipline?"

Remus nodded. "Indeed, I did."

"Oh my God," she said breathlessly, touching a hand to her heart. "Oh my God. Are you fucking serious?"

"Language!" Rita cried predictably.

"I get to zipline off the Eiffel Tower? Like, for real? Like, when I get back to England, someone's going to ask me what I did abroad and I can tell them that I casually ziplined? In Paris? Off the Eiffel Tower?"

"On principle," James commented, "I refuse to say anything positive about this hellscape of a country. That said, holy shit."

"Holy shit is bloody right!" Lily cried, bouncing on the balls of her feet. "That's—that’s real life spy stuff, that's incredible, that's like superhero—oh my God." She grabbed hold of James's arm, gazing up at his handsome face with wide, excited eyes. "I'm going to be like Ladybug!"

"I’m not familiar with insects that slide down the Eiffel Tower, but I guess they could?"

"No, not the actual insect, I meant Miraculous Ladybug," Lily explained, laughing, and gave his arm a squeeze. "You know, Ladybug, the superhero from the cartoon? Zips around Paris? She's got like, a magic yo-yo and a red bodysuit with black spots, and her partner in crime-fighting is a cat—I mean, not a literal cat, but that's his costume because he's Chat Noir and he's got these adorable cat ears—and they're in love but they don't know they're in love?"

He’d tilted his head slightly at some point during her rambling explanation of the show, but a corner of his mouth had pulled back in a half-smile. "I'm afraid I can't endorse any show set in France, but it does sound interesting."

"Well, you should make an exception for this because you are missing out on the greatest two-person love square to ever grace television," said Lily gravely, but slipped back into another smile immediately. "See, in real life, Ladybug is Marinette, and Marinette's in love with Adrien, but Adrien's in love with Ladybug, and it's just ridiculous, honestly, and every time they save the day they say, 'pound it!'" She dropped his arm and mimed bumping fists with her own hands. "And it's so cute, and I know I'm a twenty-eight-year-old woman but I am profoundly obsessed and make all of my friends watch it with me."

"If anyone could persuade me," he told her, "it'd be you."

"I mean, yeah, because the boy superhero is a cat, and he's got mad hair—not quite as nice as yours because his is blonde, but still, I figured that'd be right up your alley."

Remus raised a hand. "Again, I hate to interrupt, but the zipline awaits."

Some distance away, Rita was glaring so intently that she might have been at risk of straining her eyes.
Right. Of course. She probably couldn’t air Lily’s excitable musings about another television show.

The good people who ran the Eiffel Tower had evidently been paid quite a lot of money for their trouble, for Lily, James, and the rest of the crew were steered ahead of the waiting crowds and given an elevator to themselves. Mercifully, Rita stayed on the ground with Remus and Euphemia, citing a need to get set up at their next destination. She sent them up with only the silent cameraman from paintballing, a sound guy Lily didn’t know, and Peter.

"So," James said, as the elevator began its ascent and Paris started to sink beneath their eyes. "Glad to finally get to see some of the city?"

Lily looked up at him curiously. "Didn't your mum tell you that she brought me to the Louvre yesterday? Even the sea witch knows about it. She had to clear it with her."

He shook his head slightly. "Can't say I'm surprised. My mum’s always—well."

"She had us ferried about in a horse-drawn carriage," Lily recalled, smiling to herself, "and showed me all of her selfie poses, which were fabulous, then she took me shopping and basically forced me into—I mean, to say that it's the most beautiful dress I've ever seen would be an understatement. I felt like a princess wearing it. Even Sir—" She clamped her mouth shut. Rita only knew about Lily’s morning excursion, as she was back at the hotel and sleeping by the time they’d gotten back from the ballet. "Anyway, it was really kind and generous of her."

He drummed his fingers against his leg, seemingly lost in thought for a moment, his lips quirked. Then he said, "You know when your mum is right about something, and she’s been right for a long time, and you eventually have to admit she’s right after all, but you really don’t want to just because she’s going to be so bloody smug about it?"

"I mean, yes. Of course I do. You've met my mother—she's hardly shy about doling out opinions."

"Yeah," he said. "That’s what I thought." He sighed deeply. "My mum’s going to be insufferable after this is all over. But I am glad you haven’t been shut up in the hotel on your first trip abroad, which would be pretty torturous. Possibly even from a legal standpoint."

"Why is she going to be insufferable?" Lily asked, unsure of how the two points were connected. "Is it because I didn't believe her when she told me the Mona Lisa was overrated? Because it sort of is, honestly. Much smaller than I thought it would be."

"Another French letdown," he said absently. After a chime went off, the elevator doors opened in front of them. "I'll tell you afterwards."

They were taken through a quick safety demonstration by a rangy bloke named Julian who James kept rolling his eyes at, undoubtedly because he was so smug and French. When it came time for one of them to be fitted into a harness, James stepped back and gestured grandly towards the raised metal platform.

"Ladybugs first," he told her.

She grinned at him. "I'd call you a gentleman, but I know you're just afraid of what the safety helmet will do to your hair."

"As always, your perceptions are dead accurate," he said with a smile. "Now harness up, Ruby Raptor—the civilians at the bottom need saving."
"Can't leave the innocent public in peril," she agreed, and tapped the side of her nose. "See you on the other side, Jack."

It didn't take long for Julian to get her situated in the harness. After that, she had time for a thumbs-up from James and a squeaked, "Good luck!" from Peter, then she lifted her feet and launched herself into the air.

It felt extraordinary.

Her body knifed through the sky like a bird's, and Lily felt as free and weightless as one of their ilk. The sun was on her back and the city of Paris spread out beneath her feet, and it was amazing.

Singular. She'd never done anything like this before—she'd spent her whole adult life working and saving, preparing for the day when she could pack up and leave and have an adventure, finally.

For all of the crap she'd put up with since she'd joined the show, and even knowing how shit it would be when the entire country watched her fall for someone who liked another girl, Lily had done something different, at least. She'd been to Paris. She'd shot a ridiculous romance novel cover. She'd found a smart, brilliant, wildly fun best friend.

That was certainly something.

She came to a jerking halt at the end of the line, laughing, her feet swinging in the air several feet above the ground, before being slowly pulled towards a raised platform by another man wearing safety gear. Rita was already standing close by, gesturing for Lily to hurry, as if Lily had any control over the proceedings when she was suspended from a harness in mid-air and safety measures had to be taken.

Once Lily had been taken out of her harness and left the platform, Rita pointed to a marquee some fifty feet away on the Champ de Mars. "We've set up the cheese tasting over there," she said. "Wait for James to finish and bring him over. Bozo will stay with you."

Then she turned and tottered away on her black suede heels, adjusting her headset beneath her beret. It was unfortunate that Rita had chosen to pair it with a black-and-white striped shirt. She could not have looked more like a stereotype if she'd slung a chain of garlic bulbs around her neck, and was attracting disparaging glares from the locals.

"Is your name really Bozo?" Lily asked the cameraman, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet.

Bozo shook his head sadly. "It's Brian, but she says that's too hard to remember."

"You need a new job, mate."

Bozo shrugged, looking utterly defeated, and pointed towards the tower. "Your boy's on his way."

Once James had landed and been extracted from his harness and bits of safety gear, Bozo paused to listen to some instruction through his headset, then gave Lily the thumbs-up to approach him. The blood was still pounding in Lily's veins from the thrill of having hurtled through the air at such a speed, and she practically flew over to meet him, coming to a halt directly in front of him as he was ruffling up his hair.

"You good?" she asked. "No immediate feelings of nausea? Hair all fine?"

He caught her eye and seemed to get stuck there, struck not dumb but certainly something. "I feel incredible," he told her.
On a whim, she reached out and slipped her hand into his, knowing that he wouldn't mind, that he'd thread their fingers together immediately. They'd racked up quite a history of hand-holding, her and James. It probably should have felt wrong or unnatural, but it never did.

"Even in France, I'm a guaranteed good time," she said, smiling up at him. "Now, come and eat some fancy cheese with me, because that's exactly what your stomach needs after an adrenaline hit."

He looked down at their intertwined hands and squeezed. "Lead the way, Ruby."

Lily didn't turn around at once, but took a couple of steps backwards and pulled him with her, her gaze caught on his face. He moved obediently along at her urging, staring unblinkingly back at her, until she felt herself redden and had to turn away.

She and James had been forced into close quarters on so many occasions—shoved into fairy-lit loveseats at parties, sent on excursions to rivers and parks—but this was the first time that being with him felt anything like a real, honest-to-goodness date. There was a difference in James today, a softness, or a keenness, or something in the way he was looking at her—she didn't know what it was, but she liked the way it felt.

She wanted to believe that it was real, just him and her in a strange, dreamlike otherworld where there was no Rita, no stupid reality television show, no cameras and no other girl he preferred to Lily, waiting quietly in the wings and preparing to snatch him back away from her when all of this was over.

Maybe this was what Paris could do to a person's head.

"I'm having a really nice time," she said as they walked towards the tent, hand-in-hand with a man who made her heart race, feeling as if she might be poised to babble if she wasn't careful. That would be embarrassing, considering all the shit she gave him about keeping up with her. "Why do you think they decided on cheese-tasting? Do you think it's because I stole that cheese from you that one time? Do they think it's our thing? Do we even have a thing?"

"Obviously they chose cheese-tasting because one of them is poisoned, and it requires the skill of Jack Diamond and Ruby Raptor to figure out which one before the prime minister samples them at a very important banquet."

"Little do they know of the years we've spent slowly building up an immunity to all manner of poisons," Lily solemnly agreed, glancing sideways at him. "Honestly, though, that idea makes more sense than cheese-tasting as a romantic date activity. Would you kiss me after I'd shoveled down a chunk of stinky Roquefort?"

"Of course," he said, as though it were obvious. "Because I would already have the taste in my mouth so who cares?"

"No, you wouldn't, because that would require you to eat a French cheese, which you're dead set against on principle."

"If it came down to it where I had to eat a disgusting French cheese to kiss you, I'd do it."

*Of course he wants to kiss you,* was her first, flighty, ludicrosly nonchalant thought.

Then her heart bottomed out of her chest.

Her feet had stopped moving of their own accord, it seemed, so Lily let go of his hand. For the first
time since the day she'd climbed out of that very first limo—which seemed like a lifetime ago—she looked directly into the camera that was trailing them for several long moments, as if by doing so she could furnish herself with answers.

The lens looked blankly back at her, offering her absolutely nothing.

She turned around and stared at James. "What?"

He looked down at his shoes, scratching at his head. "Oh, er. That slipped out. I mean." He dropped his hand to his side. "I mean I’m not sorry, but I was trying to wait until later—but I don’t know why. I guess I just thought that I had to—I dunno, build up to it, or something."

Build up to what build up to what build up to what?

Lily never normally had a problem thinking of a comeback. She was good with words, quick and sharp, and blessed with a brand of wit that made conversation easy, but James Potter had succeeded where so many others had failed, and cleared her mind completely of anything that might have been helpful to her now.

She hadn’t a fucking clue what she was supposed to say.

"Then again," he went on, "it’s not like patience has ever been anything like a strength of mine. Did you know I got kicked out of the school choir for always coming in too early? Anyway." He cleared his throat and dragged his eyes up to hers. "The thing is, Lily, I… I really don’t know how to say it except to just, like, out and say it? Remus probably had a perfect speech prepared for Bea, but I’m not—and you know I’m not. I mean. The thing is…” He let out a breath. "I fancy you. Like I really, really fancy you. There. I said it."

This isn't really happening, said a loud, stubborn, angry part of her brain.

Of course it is, kiss him immediately, said another.

"No," she said stupidly.

His brow furrowed. "No?"

"You shouldn't—don't say things like that," she said blankly. "You can't, because—because you like Isabella. Better." It tore at her to say that. "You like Isabella better and you've always liked her better and that's why you wouldn't tell me and I knew that was why."

"I—I did like her better. At one point. And I couldn't—I didn't want to hurt her because I'd said things to her—you know. So I had to—it was weird, and complicated, and I couldn't tell you until I knew… And now I do. So, the thing is…well. You were the one who told me," he said, "that I could change my mind."

Her pulse hadn't even properly slowed from the zipline, and now it was buzzing with an intense, frenetic kind of madness. "You changed your mind? Just like that?"

"Not—not like in an instant, or like—it just...happened. I know you were angry on our last date because you thought I was—messing around, or whatever, and I'd said I wouldn't—but I wasn't putting it on in front of your mum, I was just—I was saying what I thought. Which is a lot, specifically of you. I just—I couldn't tell you yet."

"Yet," she repeated, the word clunking in her brain like an anchor dropped from the side of a ship. "Yet, because...oh, God." A horrible, ugly fear sprang from a dark recess of her mind. "Tell me this
isn't because of last night, because I know you tried to give her keys, and I know she turned you down and—"

"No no no, that's not—it's not like that at all. I asked Isabella to go to the fantasy suite so I could tell her—well. I can tell her now and pretend like they won't cut this, but—"

He strode the few steps to one of the cameras, where he stared directly into the lens. "Look, Isabella. Last night—I was asking you to go into the fantasy suite so I could tell you things weren’t going to work out between us. That I liked—that I liked Lily more, and that I was so sorry I let you keep thinking I was going to pick you, but I needed—I needed to be sure. Because I didn’t want to take it back and then take it back again, and like...this show is bloody insane, yeah? Because I had to wait until then to tell you because I didn’t want to let you down in front of millions of people, but then you didn’t—and now I have no idea how I’m going to tell you…yeah."

He came back to Lily, looking sheepish. "Anyway. That’s what...that’s what happened."

Lily had wanted, so badly, to hear every inelegant word that was tumbling out of his mouth. She'd even imagined it happening, one too many times.

Now that she was getting what she wanted, all she wanted to do was shove it away from her in a blind panic, like a hug that had turned suffocating and invasive.

She wasn't sure if she didn't believe him or if she simply didn't want to, because if all of this went south, and if Isabella Marks snapped her fingers and he jumped at her summons, not believing him made her clever. It made her a woman who wasn't so soft that she'd fall for a lie because it was a lie she wanted to hear.

The latter would make her pathetic. Martyred. Dissected to pieces on social media, publicly scorned and widely pitied. She'd be marked as the girl who got steamrolled for the rest of her life, and it didn't matter if ninety-nine out of a hundred people knew that she'd been there to write an article, there'd always be the one who'd look at her and think her stupid.

Isabella had said that Lily understood James better than she did, and for her part, Lily had agreed with her. She still felt a connection to him that she couldn't really explain, and in all of the confusion and awkwardness that had come with falling for him, she had been able to take comfort in her belief that at least he was a good guy, at least it wasn't a matter of poor taste on her part.

He and Isabella were both right—Lily did have an uncanny perceptiveness when it came to James, and more than that, she trusted him, which left her with only one option.

But if she was wrong…

Fuck, it would hurt so much if she was wrong.

"I don't know what you expect me to do right now," she said finally, after a very long moment of silence. "Throw myself into your arms? I'm not a backup option, okay? What am I supposed to think when she turns you down and suddenly you're telling me all of this? I'm not a consolation prize."

"No," he said, smiling faintly. "You're not. Not to me."

A band of warmth settled around her heart and squeezed.

God, she was going to give in. She was going to give in so easily, and then he'd kiss her and hold her and smile at her like that a few more times, and she'd go and fall in love with him like a fool,
"Don't—don't do that," she said, shaking her head. "Don't be cute when I'm having a crisis."

"Don't be cute, don't mess around, don't tell your mum nice things about you—what am I supposed to do, then, Evans?"

"I don't bloody know!" she cried, and threaded her fingers through her hair. "Why do you always expect me to have all the answers, Potter? I don't even know what I'm supposed to do."

He just kept smiling at her, all adorable and fond and much too attractive for his own good.

"What?" she demanded.

"Nothing. Just—you're really dramatic. Not that I'm not into that."

"Oh, I'm dramatic?" She wasn't going to smile, she wasn't going to—fuck, she already was smiling. "The bloke who sank to the floor in the airport and threw a tantrum over France is calling me dramatic? That's the position you're going to take, you tragic rich boy?"

"Please note that I never implied I wasn't just as bad."

"You're more dramatic. I'm normally a lot calmer than this, but you've been a terrible influence."

"You're the one voluntarily spending more time with my mum, the most dramatic of all."

"Your mum offered to take me into the city and sent me to the ballet in a princess dress," she said. "Quite frankly, she's currently got you beaten out in the romance department."

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"Your mum offered to take me into the city and sent me to the ballet in a princess dress," she said. "Quite frankly, she's currently got you beaten out in the romance department."

"Excuse me that I haven't been in a position to do much more than shower you with a month's worth of croissants. Being under lock and key is kinda hampering my game."

"Your mum bought the croissants too, and she—" Lily stopped herself, recalling how he'd checked to see if she was wearing sunscreen at the park, and how readily she'd take that kind of concern over posh, expensive gifts. "Forget that, I'm lying through my teeth." She sighed irritably. "She doesn't have you beat at all."

"Perfect. Glad that's settled." He stepped toward her, bringing his hand toward hers, but not quite touching—a question in a gesture. "Feeling better now?"

"I don't really know, except that I'm still not in the mood to eat bunch of stinky cheeses," she murmured, nudging his hands with her own. He caught them at once, warm fingers lacing through hers, and her heart skipped happily. "Not that I'm going to kiss you on camera. Or ever. I haven't decided yet, so don't go getting ideas."

"Getting? I already had. And you know what they say—you can't kill an idea."

"I could kill you instead," she suggested, "though I'd prefer to do it without so many witnesses around, if you know of any ways to arrange such a thing."

"Well, Ruby," he said, "we are about to go test some poisons, so…"

"Jack," she said pointedly, "are you really going to make me ask for the keys to your bloody suite?"

"Oh," he said, his cheeks tingling pink. "I'm with you now, Ruby. And no, I'd never do such a thing." He cleared his throat. "D'you want—d'you want the keys? I have to ask, for posterity's and
Ursula’s sakes.

"I mean, I had planned to spend my evening stealing hotel soaps," she said with a roll of her eyes. "But if you insist, I guess I can make an appearance, provided you don't drop dead while I'm there, or everyone will think it was me."

"I don’t insist because I’m a gentleman who believes in consent, but you can take all the hotel soaps from the suite. I won’t fight you for them at all."

"I feel like we've done more than enough fighting already, thanks." She cocked her head to the side. "I think arguing has been more our thing than cheese, really. Why d'you think that is?"

"Because we trust each other," he said. "Also because we’re used to being right and letting everyone know it."

"I do trust you," she said, and let herself smile at him, "and you trust me, which means you can definitely tell me your middle name later, yes? No? Maybe?" She swayed on the spot, swinging his hands gently from side to side. "Yes?"

He froze, his eyes locking with hers and not moving at all. "What?" he said evenly.

"Oh, right. Context. Well, full disclosure, I hung out at the ballet with your best mate last night, and he mentioned that you've got an absolute stinker of a middle name."

James pulled a face. "The betrayal continues," he said. "Lowest of lows, backstabber of backstabbers—"

"In his defense, he wouldn't tell me what it was, and he got at least three amorous ponces off my back—"

"He did?"

"—plus, even if you have the worst middle name in the world, you're really hot, so I'm still going to have sex dreams about you."

"Well, fine," he said, clearly trying not to smile. "So long as that’s true…I’ll tell you my middle name."

"Your secret's safe with me," she promised.

Never in James's twenty-eight years and whatever amount of days he’d been alive had he ever envisioned himself as being anything remotely close to happy while in the cursed land of France.

But then came Lily Evans. Or Ruby Raptor, or Ladybug, or whatever other name he called her… Ever since he’d come flying down the Eiffel Tower, his heart thundering pleasantly in his chest, the wind whipping against his face, free and weightless and completely alive... At first it might have been his body’s natural reaction to hurtling through the air from a height that would have killed him under other circumstances. Since he’d landed, though, it had all been Lily.

After Isabella had rejected him soundly, he’d tossed, turned, and agonized all night about what to tell Lily: should he come clean with her about how he felt? Should he continue with Isabella and then ring Lily once the show was over and he’d broken up with Isabella? Should he forget the whole show and sneak onto the Eurostar in the morning and begin a life on the run?
He’d been uncertain until the moment he saw Lily.

Things had a funny way of clarifying themselves around her.

He’d told her how he’d felt. She’d needed some persuading, but that was fair, that was totally fair, and she did eventually believe him and now she knew. She knew how he felt and he knew how she felt and it was the same: a sense of rightness, a shared laugh, a pleasant tightness in the chest that kept repeating yes yes yes this is exactly where you’re supposed to be.

He’d never forgive Rita for forcing him to spend the happiest moments of his life in France. But then again, he was never forgiving her for anything, so it didn’t really matter.

Although he refused to compliment anything that had come from within French borders, he and Lily devoured the variety of cheeses offered to them. It was kind of their thing, really, which was funny and ridiculous and made both of them grin stupidly. That, and the whole fancying thing.

After restraining himself for ages, he could finally reach out and touch her without immediate remorse for leading her on. So he did. And so did she. They seemed to find all sorts of small ways to ensure contact: elbow nudges and linked hands and knocked knees when sitting. At dinner she kept nudging his foot under the table, which was such a secondary-school level of interaction but it sent a small thrill through him every single time.

He couldn’t kiss her, not yet, but soon. So very, very soon but all the same not nearly soon enough.

Every now and then he’d remember his mum was watching all this. If he ever glanced her way, she was starry-eyed and grinning, clutching her hands to her chest.

It was weird.

And it kept on going. The date, and the touching in front of his mum and the cameras, and his mum’s pervy watching. Because Rita refused to let them cut their date short. No, she told them, they had to try all the cheeses. Even the disgusting ones.

Then they had to enjoy all three courses of their planned meal at the posh French restaurant selected for them. Not even dessert could be cut short. And it turned out Rita, ever the sea witch, had ordered them a chocolate souffle, the dessert that took the longest amount of time to prepare.

James heavily suspected this was revenge for every moment he and Lily had defied her. In fairness, though, they were providing terrific footage and he could understand from a practical perspective that she wanted it all. Still. It was probably mostly revenge. It was what James would have done.

When they were finally, finally allowed to return to the hotel together, James could hardly hear Rita’s instructions to Bozo over the blood pounding in his head.

He took Lily’s hand as they exited the car, not letting go even once they stood outside his hotel room door, his mum tactfully left behind in the lobby.

"It feels like I should say something meaningful here," he told Lily, "but I really have a lot on my mind besides things I need to say. I mean, I can say I’m dead relieved my mum’s not here for this part, but other than that..."

"You mean you don't have a soliloquy prepared?" said Lily, feigning shock. "What have you been doing with your time?"

"Thinking about kissing you," he admitted, because any sort of wit he had seemed to have floated
away.

"You know you could get to that quicker if you just...opened your door, right?"

He did not need to be told twice.

He flung the door open and stepped inside backward, pulling her with him, beaming at her so hard his face hurt. She kicked her foot back to shut the door behind them, making a loud slam that felt extremely appropriate.

Because here they were. At last. *Alone.*

All cameras were on the other side of the door. All other people were on the other side of the door.

He’d been alone with a girl plenty of times, but he felt like he was sixteen again, alone with Heather Jordan in his room for the first time, with the door closed and clear, mutual expectations of what was coming hanging in the air.

Without breaking eye contact, he closed the single step keeping him from Lily. She matched his footwork, hands still entwined, walking the short distance to the door. He let go of her to slide both hands alongside her face, lightly pushing her back against the door, where it connected with a very soft thud.

A vicious stab of glee shot through him: Rita and Bozo and all those other stalkers could hear them, if they were still outside—and they almost certainly were—but this was not for them. This was for James and Lily alone.

He kissed her.

Collided with her.

The door shifted in its frame as they settled against it, clunking loudly into place, a ricocheting reminder of what they were doing for everyone waiting outside, but James didn’t care.

He was *kissing* her—kissing Lily Evans, and that smart, cheeky, *brilliant* mouth of hers, those soft, full lips which parted at his urging, tasted him, devoured him with a fervor matched only by his own. His hands moved to slide along her back and hold her firmly in place; she threaded her fingers into his hair to pull him closer, and the hungry little sounds she made were—*Christ*, if she did that with her tongue again he’d burst.

This was *nothing* like being sixteen and alone with Heather Jordan.

Kissing Lily was magic, better than paintball, better than the zipline, a firework display for his overworked senses. Kissing her was the electricity jolting through his veins, the raucous pounding in his heart. Kissing her put every other kiss he’d ever had to shame. Kissing her was exactly what James should have been doing all along, exactly what he wanted to keep on doing, perhaps a million more times, which might have gotten him halfway close to enough.

Eventually, tragically, James knew he had to come up for air before he met his end in her arms, so he pulled away with great reluctance, his hands lifting to gently cup her face.

"Well," said Lily, a little breathlessly, "had I any lingering doubts as to your intentions, James Potter, that would have done away with them."

Up close her eyes became even more radiant—stunning, truly, with nuanced and layered shades of
green. He’d never been able to appreciate them fully before, not from a distance. Nor had he properly savored the few freckles strewn across her nose, or the curve of her lips, or the flush just beginning to tinge her cheeks.

"Have I told you I fancy you?" he said. "I think so but my mind’s not working right right now, so if I haven’t: you are a marvel."

"You mentioned it, I think? It’s all gone a bit fuzzy, really. This is strange," she added, and tilted her head slightly, gazing past his shoulder at their surroundings, "being alone for once. It’s sort of like meeting you for the first time, except I already know you and I think you just ruined me."

"I’m absolutely not telling you to stop talking because I love when you talk, but also I really just want to ruin you for a bit longer, if that’s all right."

She gave a little half-shrug as her gaze moved back to his face. "I mean, we’ve got all night."

With great effort, he pulled his face slightly further away from hers. "So I can’t kiss you again right now?"

"Oh, no, I meant—I meant you can," she said, her lovely eyes widening, "you can a lot, as much as you want, because we have the whole night, though we should really talk about things, too."

He did hear what she said after you can a lot, but it dimly registered and filed itself away neatly in the back corner of his brain.

"Okay," he said, and kissed her again. She let out a soft, surprised sound but responded immediately, smiling against his lips.

She liked him. She really liked him.

It hadn’t seemed plausible, because Lily was amazing, but she laughed at his jokes and expected his best and wanted him to kiss her a lot.

Not forever, though, as after several deliriously happy minutes, she reluctantly broke away from him.

"Wait," she murmured when he moved in for another kiss. "Wait a minute. I’ve got—" He pulled away to let her speak, but Lily tugged his head back and kissed him again. "Stuff." Another long, lingering kiss. "To tell you. Important stuff."

She moved her hands from where they’d been tangled in his hair and gave his chest a gentle push as she pulled away from him properly, the back of her head knocking against the door.

He had never been the bloke to be constantly whipping off his shirt, but he felt a deep need to do so now, to grab the hem and tug it up over his hair so he could press his skin against hers.

But she had something important to say.

*Important,* he told himself, and managed to both step away and keep his shirt on. His heart kept pounding away, but he was at least catching his breath.

"Right," he said, and took several steps into the room and safely away from her. "Okay. Go for it."

"Okay." Lily took a deep breath, her fingers combing through the beautiful mess he’d made of her hair. "So the thing is—" She let out a contented sigh. "Sorry, I’m just—if I’m in any way
inarticulate while I explain this, it's just because you're...you, and just unfairly fit, honestly, but there is stuff, I promise."

He shook his hands, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "Yeah, okay. And?"

"Right, so—yes. Do you remember how you said I was wasting myself at my job because I worked in a shop and you couldn't understand why?" She drummed her fingernails against the door. "Well, really you were right about that because I am completely wasted in my job, but I don't actually work in a shop."

James felt the floor drop out beneath him.

She had been holding out on him.

"Oh my God," he said, unable to stop himself from taking a step forward. "You are a secret agent?!

"No, of course not," she said, with a laugh he'd seemed to surprise out of her. "I'd be a good secret agent, but really—and before I tell you this you should know that in no way have I misrepresented myself. I mean, I was supposed to act all vapid and flirty, but I realized almost immediately that I couldn't not act like myself, and—look, I'm skipping ahead." She shook her head as if ridding it of excess water. "The thing is, James, I'm actually a journalist, and my boss sort of...snuck me onto the show."

Admittedly, undercover journalist was not nearly as cool as a secret agent. Almost nothing was. That said, it did throw a lot of things into sharp relief. Like why Lily was on this show at all, and why she’d been "working in a shop," and why she hadn’t just left after the first couple ceremonies when they hadn’t really been interested in each other and James had been so set on Isabella.

It also, however, raised a few questions.

"Wait," he said. "Is Lily Evans your real name? Or is it like Ruby Raptor? Oh my God, don’t tell me your real name is Ruby, that’d be too weird."

"No, Lily Evans is my real name," she said, still tapping away at the door, her pianist's fingers drumming a quick, disjointed rhythm against the wood. "They changed it on our website and my boss knows one of the fact-checkers on the show, so he had her approve the bullshit application he wrote for me, and I hated it, honestly. I didn't want to do this, but he's such a dick and he thinks—anyway, I've been stuck here working on this ridiculously thorough Rita Skeeter takedown—"

"You're taking down Rita?" He laughed. He'd thought he couldn't fancy Lily Evans any more than he already did, and then she went and managed it anyway. "Oh hell yes, you're taking down Rita. Vengeance is ours!"

Lily laughed again, sagging back against the door.

"I'm glad you're taking this so well," she said. "I was worried that you might have thought I was being deceitful—I mean I wasn't because I haven't lied about a thing except my job. That was my real mum you met, and I still want to go traveling, and all of that other stuff."

It wasn’t hard to believe any of that. She had been so thoroughly herself in every way—or at least she had once she’d given up on being boring for the first couple episodes. Even in the beginning, though, her real self had snuck in here and there. She might have thought she’d be an excellent spy, but she was certainly no award-winning actress.
He approached her again, this time offering out his hands. She took them and he led her into the room, away from the door, where he settled his hands on her waist.

"How could I not take this news well?" he asked, looking down at her and smiling. "You’re going to expose this rubbish show for what it is." He paused. "I mean, that is the only enormous secret you were going to reveal, right?"

"Well, now, I don't know," she said, her arms curling around his shoulders. "I might also have been lying about my intention to have sex with some sleazy guy in Santorini."

"This news is shocking. Shocking, I tell you, and a complete and utter surprise."

"Well, there could have been a guy, but someone seems pretty adamant that he wants to come with me, and I’m sort of hoping he’s serious about that because I’m still quite set on sex in Santorini as a general concept."

"Hm. I’ve also heard rumors that said guy is very adamant about going with you and that he’s definitely down for sex in Santorini. Possibly other locations as well. But not on the beach because sand has a habit of getting into extremely uncomfortable places. It’s extremely insanitary."

"We really haven't known each other for long enough to decide if we should go traveling together," Lily pointed out. "That said, I'm crazy about you and I really don't care and you should come anyway. My itinerary is pretty flexible in that way."

"Let’s see," James said, sending them swaying just a bit, back and forth, "I could stay at my job that I only sort of like while my insanely hot girlfriend travels the world alone...or I could go with her. Yeah, I think I know what I prefer of the two."

"Girlfriend," she said happily, and tipped her head back, exposing her pretty neck to all manner of intoxicating possibilities. "All I came here to do was write an article and now here I am in a hotel suite in Paris, of all places, planning a round-the-world trip with the bloody bachelor. With you."

"I'd explain where I came from but you already said I talk about my parents banging too much."

"I hope my boyfriend inherited their stamina, in that case. I intend to make good use of it."

"Don’t worry. You weren’t wrong," he told her as he lowered his face towards hers, "to start the date by complimenting my resiliency."

"So," said Lily, later, gazing blankly at the ceiling, "you know how I'm kind of big on self-improvement?"

"I hope this isn’t a lead up to a criticism of me, because I was feeling pretty good about that."

"Oh no, it's exactly the opposite. I remain thoroughly ruined and it's entirely your fault."

"Ah, so we’re on the same page. Mutually ruined, just how I prefer it."

"Mutually ruined," she agreed, and nudged him with the side of her hand, turning her palm to face upwards. "Put it there."

James didn't slap her palm as instructed, but placed his flat over hers, curling their fingers together.
Lily had been having quite the day.

She'd woken up that morning believing that an afternoon of relative harmony was the best she could have hoped for, and that it'd be an achievement if she and James could make it through their date without one of them starting an argument, but he'd blown her expectations completely asunder. From the moment he admitted that he fancied her, their date became an exercise in careless spontaneity, a series of moments in which Lily told herself not to do something, only to immediately disobey her own orders.

They were good orders, too. Sound, sensible dictates. Things like don't believe him, don't act so smitten, and don't have sex with him, no matter how much you want to.

Dictates were all well and good, but Lily hadn't reckoned on James, who flung himself into wanting her with an ardor that surprised her almost as much as it made her shiver. He wanted to kiss her and touch her all the time, and he was so good at it, and did things to her in the privacy of his suite that were sure to make her spontaneously combust with glee and shame whenever she thought about them.

She might have fashioned an uncannily clear window to the inner workings of James Potter's brain, but he sussed out her body just as fast, which made him damn near impossible to resist.

Resist. As if Lily hadn't done her fair share of instigation. By the time the sun began its daily descent into darkness, she had ignored every single one of her decrees and then some.

"Remind me to thank Beatrice for shipping us to the point of lunacy," she said after a quiet moment, once he'd taken to tracing slow circles on her palm with his thumb, "or seek vengeance against her. I'm not entirely sure. It's a really tough one to call."

"Believe me," James said darkly, "Jack Diamond and Ruby Raptor will have their revenge. It's both of their middle names."

"Actually, Ruby’s middle name is—oh." Lily let out a little gasp of air, her eyes widening. "Of course—"

Beside her, James's whole body seemed to stiffen. "Shit."

"You thought I'd forget, didn’t you?"

He groaned like he was dying of dysentery, releasing his grip on her to cover his face with both hands.

"I can’t believe I almost let that go!" she exclaimed. Laughing, she twisted onto her side to face him, propping her head up with her hand. "Must be all the ruining you did. I'll take that middle name now, if you please."

"Would that I had ruined longer," he lamented.

"Any longer and I wouldn't be able to walk tomorrow. Keep your promise and tell me."

"Right," he said, and pulled his pillow out from under his head and pressed it on top of his face. "My middle name," he said, his voice muffled by his apparent efforts to suffocate himself, "is—" He said a word after is, but the specific sounds of it were lost to the pillow.

"To my face, please," said Lily, and gave the pillow a gentle tug.
Eventually he let her pull it off him, revealing his grimacing face. "It’s Oddjob," he said quickly.

Lily blinked at him. "It's wh—"

"So, let’s talk about the last episode, yeah?" he carried on loudly. "I’m not worried about us but I need to figure out what to tell Isabella on our date—"

"Don't think that you can distract me, your brilliantly clever girlfriend, with your actual problems," she protested, tossing the pillow to the end of the bed. She dropped her hand to his chest and started to trace a line along his collarbone. "Not that I don't care deeply about those, but Oddjob? As in, hat-throwing Oddjob, my favorite evil stooge?"

"Ye-es," he said, the word stuttering as he shivered beneath her touch. "That one. Anyway, I can’t tell Isabella the news in front of my parents—can you imagine? ‘This is my mum Euphemia, this is my dad Fleamont, and my new girlfriend is, surprise, not you—"

"Potter," said Lily firmly, "I'm not just going to forget your middle name in the face of a more pressing issue that I can't in good conscience ignore, so please note that this victory is only temporary." She nudged a little closer to him, and dropped a soft kiss on his shoulder. "That said, I'm all ears."

He reached up to stroke his fingers through her hair. "You're gorgeous, you know? Including your ears."

After everything they’d spent the past few hours doing, it seemed unlikely that James could make her blush by simply touching her hair, but he managed it easily.

He had such a good, loyal heart, and less observant people might have missed that about him.

"I do know, but I like you reminding me," she said, smiling, "and I like that you care about Isabella. She's a good person and there’s never been anything sour between us. If you want me to talk to her in private, I will, but I'm guessing you'd rather do it yourself?"

"Thanks, but yeah... This isn’t exactly something I can delegate. I’m just—I hate what this is going to do to her self-confidence. You won’t see the footage until the show airs, but her family—they’re shit. And they make her feel like shit and I think we should go slash their tires or something later on, Jack and Ruby style."

"Jack and Ruby uphold the law, not break it," Lily reminded him gently, "and I think it would be best to leave Isabella to deal with her family because she won't appreciate the intrusion. Anyway, I’m sure she’ll get there in the end, it’s just—it can be complicated, when it's family. It's really hard to call your relatives out when they’re being dicks, and even harder to listen to an outsider when they try to make you see sense about it."

He lifted himself up onto his elbows. "Sounds like you’re speaking from experience."

"Oh, well—yes, I suppose. My sister won't speak to me because I called her husband out for being a sexist piece of shit," she explained, trying to sound as if it didn’t really bother her. "She's always getting offended and freezing me out for some reason, and normally I bend over backwards to apologize, but I won't this time because I'm done lying to appease her, and she's furious about it."

James balanced on one elbow, his other arm stretching over to pull her down into a brief kiss.

"Gorgeous and morally sound," he said. "Can’t say I expected to walk off the show with one of those."
"I assumed you'd be a poster boy for patriarchal bullshit when I met you," she said, responding to
his kiss with another, "and look how wrong I was."

"I’m sorry your sister can’t see sense. That’s miserable."

"It's fine, really. Family aren't always good for you."

He flopped back down onto the bed, smiling faintly. "Well. As far as post-coital conversations go,
this one’s gone a bit off course. That said, I realize I’m the one who started it by bringing up
another woman in bed."

"You did, but that’s okay, I'll bang you again later and you can take another stab at it."

"Ah, you truly know the way to my heart." He wagged his eyebrows. "But first I need to ruin the
mood the other direction by bringing up the proposal they’re expecting me to give in a few days…"
James did not have a count on how many mornings he’d woken up beside a woman. He wasn’t a perv, after all. Counting stuff like that was dead weird.

In fact, he had never ranked anything related to women. Again, that was dead weird, super disrespectful, and something only Peter would do. But if James had been under the slightest bit of pressure—for instance, if a stranger had asked him casually on the Tube—he would have ranked this morning-after as the best he’d ever had.

Yet.

He didn’t want to get away with himself. Not when he and Lily were just now dating. And banging.

Christ, were they banging.

He sleepily stretched his arms above his head, savoring the slight ache in his muscles, and settled one of his arms around Lily’s dozing form. If he had any luck in the world, he’d have plenty more mornings like this.

Only hopefully slightly better. Because although nothing about the night before had been anything but enjoyable, there was that tinge of guilt lurking on account of Isabella.

Poor Isabella, who he hadn’t been able to...well. Break up with wasn’t quite accurate. They had never formally called themselves boyfriend and girlfriend. They hadn’t even kissed each other on the mouth, despite being in close proximity for nearly a month.

But they’d said they liked each other. They had talked vaguely about their lives together after the show, which wasn’t properly committing, but it was...something. More than nothing, which made him feel just slightly too much like a cheater.

He’d have felt worse if Isabella hadn’t refused to go into the fantasy suite with him, a baffling move he could not begin to puzzle out. Maybe that had been her breaking up with him. Maybe she’d lost interest and was too afraid to tell him to his face.

But if that were true, she could have told him away from the cameras in the suite, just like he’d been planning to do.

In any case, he had to be straight with her today. Although if she found out through the grapevine that Lily had gone to the suite with James, that might be enough of a sign for her to understand…

But it didn’t matter. He still had to tell Isabella himself, even if she did hear the gossip. It was the right thing to do.

He was knocked from his musings, and Lily from her sleep, by a fist banging on the door so hard that the show would likely be paying damages to the hotel.

Rita’s too-knowing voice carried through the door. "You have an hour to finish up...whatever...and be ready for the day, Potter. Breakfast is out here waiting for you to bring it in."
"Hm," James said, lolling his head sideways to look at Lily. "D’you think breakfast is a trap?"

"What?" said Lily sleepily, blinking at him as if she was surprised to see him there. She turned her head slightly to eye the door. "Did she say there was breakfast?"

"She did...but is she just trying to lure out Jack and Ruby for some sort of paparazzi attempt to shoot the morning-after look?"

Lily lifted herself to her elbows and looked as if she was considering this possibility for a moment. Her hair was marvelously tousled from the night's activities. "I am hungry," she eventually announced. "Can you go and get it? Dunno where my clothes went."

"I feel compelled to bring you food," he lamented. "But I don’t want to be on camera again. I was just getting used to being a normal, unmonitored human again. Or at least the regular, government’s-always-watching sort of monitored."

"I’d be more sympathetic but I need food," Lily said, "and so do you, so hop to it."

His growling stomach agreed that he needed food, but he’d be damned if he was giving Rita a second more of himself than required. The hotel robe could cover his body easily enough. For his face, though, he’d need to be more creative…

One minute later, James cracked open the door, straining to see through the fabric of the pillowcase he’d donned as a hood. He silently cursed the show for splurging on a top-notch hotel for the trip. Surely lesser hotels had thinner fabric covering the pillows, fabric that James could have seen through. Instead he quickly resorted to pulling the fabric away from his face so he could at least strain his eyes down toward his feet.

"Really, Potter?" Rita asked.

He couldn’t see more than a couple vague blobs through the pillowcase, one of which definitely had a weird, camera-shaped blob growing out of its shoulder. He could also hear the implied raised eyebrow from Rita.

At least breakfast did indeed lay at his feet, a tray with silver domes over the plates and everything. The heady, perfect aroma of fried bacon had his mouth watering.

"I knew it was a trap," he muttered as he squatted down to pick up the tray. Of course, that task required both hands, which meant the pillowcase fell back against his face. Very delicately, he stood up and took a step back into the room, only jostling the tray a little when he banged his elbow into the doorframe.

Lily laughed from the bed.

"I’d like to see you do better," he told her as he struggled to keep his balance, one foot out and searching for the door. He eventually found it, kicked the door shut with unnecessary force, and turned around. "Come take the pillowcase off my head?"

He heard enough rustling and then footsteps to hope she was complying.

"You could have just dragged the tray in," Lily drawled as she pulled off the pillowcase, leaving him blinking.

He scowled. "You could have said something earlier."
"Did you want my voice correcting you to be recorded on camera?"

"Fair point." He shoved the tray at her. "Right. Why don’t you eat while I jump in the shower."

"If you wanted to be expedient, we could both eat now and then shower together," Lily said, looking up at him with eyes that were wide and innocent and far too dangerous.

"Oh." James brought the tray back toward his chest. "Now that’s the sort of idea I definitely don’t want recorded..."

By the time they’d finished "whatever," as Rita called it, James had about one minute to towel his hair, throw his shirt on, and awkwardly hop across the room while pulling on his trousers.

He opened the door to find Rita standing directly in front of him, her fist raised for another walloping knock. Bozo and his ever-attached camera stood nearby, catching James zipping up his fly. Not exactly the sort of footage James wanted to show the nation, but at least he had his shirt on. Zipping up could have meant he’d just been to the loo for urinating purposes, and not "whatever."

"It’s confessional time," Rita said, looking like the canary that had got the cream and also won the lottery.

Of course, she told him on the way to the room they were using as a confessional, he couldn’t say what he was really thinking.

"This is the only time, Potter, I will ever ask you to shut your gob: don’t you dare tell the viewers you’re settled. And that goes for more than just the confessional."

She scolded him for being too direct with Lily on their date—and what a joke his monologue to Isabella had been, "like we would ever air that"—and instructed him that under no circumstances was he allowed indicate to Isabella that he had already picked Lily. Rita would be keeping Isabella isolated in her room, preventing her from learning that Lily had joined James in the fantasy suite.

"I have to give Isabella some hint," James argued as he dropped onto the confessional stool. "I’m not a monster like you."

"And I may be a sea witch but I need compelling footage." She stood directly in front of him, her knees brushing against his legs, her eyes narrowed behind her bejeweled spectacles. "And since you’re legally obligated to follow the terms of the contract, which includes not telling them who you’re picking..."

"So don’t air the part where I hint to her what’s coming, okay? But I can’t—I can’t completely shock her at the end. Then I’d be just as bad as you."

"I realize that I’m not going to convince you to my side of this. I also realize that I can’t stop you from blurring it out unexpectedly. So we are making a deal here, Potter." She placed one hand on his knee. Not grabbing, or doing anything other than touching, but it still made James shiver. "You can give Isabella a subtle hint or two. But if you go any further..." She slowly withdrew her hand, staring him down, her eyebrows slightly lifted.

The thing was, Rita had been menacing at one point. She’d had an absurd amount of control over his life for much of the show, when she could—and had—put him in a stream of miserable situations. She’d been able to limit his communications and his interactions and even his physical location.
But James had picked Lily. And Lily had picked James. And there were only two dates left.

He broke out into a slow grin. "And if I do, what will you do about it, Rita? The show’s almost over and I’m never going to see you again."

He had a feeling Lily would be very proud of him for this.

But he did not like the wicked smirk that Rita volleyed back to him.

"We may have almost finished filming," she said, "but we’ve barely begun editing. And if I feel like it—and I might—I can make you look very, very cruel. This show is going to be obscenely popular—do you really want to deal with all that hate mail? With how that will dog you online and in person for the rest of your life?"

James’s grin faded.

"And not just you," Rita continued, "but your new little girlfriend. I could make it look like Lily has been scheming all along to undermine Isabella, if I want. Yes, you’ll both know what happened, but I control the public narrative. You might be wealthy and well-situated, so maybe you can take the heat of the public eye..." She leaned an inch closer to him, her chest over his knees. "But can Lily?"

James clenched his hands around the edges of the stool, his nails threatening to crack.

Rita fucking Skeeter.

She had him by the balls and she knew it. Lily’s career—whether it was her real writing one or her fake shop one—would not be helped by a horde of angry people chasing after her with (hopefully metaphorical) pitchforks. And she didn’t have the financial situation he did, where he could loaf about unemployed if he felt like it.

"Fine, Ursula," James bit out. "We have a deal."

He assumed Rita was trying to smile, but she really couldn’t manage anything less menacing than what the real Ursula would put on. "Excellent," she said. "That’s what I like to hear, Prince Eric."

After they’d finished filming his extremely uncomfortable confessional, during which she redirected him on no less than ten occasions, she led him out toward the hotel lobby.

"I’m going to go work with Lily on her confessional," she said, "and then we’ll head out for your date with poor Isabella." As they rounded the corner into the lobby, she added, "Oh, and Bonnie quit, so we’re skipping the rose ceremony. There’s no point in wasting resources with only two contestants left."

James stopped in his tracks. "Bonnie quit? Like, last night? Last night while Lily and I were—er."

Rita kept walking, apparently not noticing he’d stopped. She waved her hand as she went on and looked down at her clipboard. "Yes. I assume she didn’t want to be openly rejected at the ceremony since it’s humiliating even if you don’t like the bachelor."

James hurried after Rita, frowning. "She could’ve left earlier, though. I mean, I guess she likes travel—maybe she stuck around for the free trip..."

Rita only hummed absently. "It doesn’t matter. No one’s going to care about her storyline any—"
She didn’t finish her word on account of James’s mother shoving her aside as she barreled toward James, arms spread wide.

"You are truly my son," Euphemia cried as she enveloped him in a hug that James suspected might have bruised his ribs.

"Rude," Rita scolded.

"Surely this sort of behavior from my wife doesn’t come as a surprise, Rita. You’ve been around her daily for several weeks now, yes?"

James fought his way out of his mum’s embrace at the sound of a voice he hadn’t heard in much too long.

"Dad!" he said, spinning around and launching himself at Fleamont.

His dad’s grip was less confining than his mum’s, but no less solid. After they separated, Fleamont clapped his hands on James’s shoulders.

It was funny. James had matched him for height at sixteen, but it still seemed wrong every time James realized he was on eye level with his own father.

"Excuse me, husband," Euphemia demanded. "My son has just fulfilled my every dream after months of machinations on my end. Your dramatic reunion can wait—I require details from him immediately."

Fleamont looked from his wife to his son. "Was that dramatic?"

James’s grin widened. "I guess I shouted a bit?"

Fleamont removed his hands from James’s shoulders. "A bit low for your mother’s threshold."

"I am right here, Fleamont," Euphemia pointed out.

"No one could ever forget, dear."

"Right," Rita said loudly. "This entire interaction is less interesting than what I could be doing. Reunite all you like, but keep the standard rules in mind, Potter. Ah, James," she said with a glance at his parents.

"Oh no," James said in a feigned tone of disappointment. "I can’t talk to you about the details, Mum. It’s in that legally binding contract you signed on my behalf without consulting me."

The second Rita started walking away, Euphemia grabbed James by his upper arms and forced him to face her.

"I’m so very sorry," she said, "that I couldn’t be there to bring you breakfast in your room—"

"I’m not," he answered.

"You know I love reveling in my victories. I’m a reveler. In fact I’m considering having a commemorative plaque made: World’s Best Matchmaker. Since you never gave me a World’s Best Mum mug," she said pointedly.

"You always asked for one! I can’t give you one just because you asked. That’s not how it works."
"Anyway, I’m so very proud of you for coming to your senses." She ruffled his hair with one hand. "I hope you showed Lily appropriate devotion and care last night."

"I am not talking about this with you."

"I require tea," said Fleamont, looking away from both of them. "I’m leaving now."

Euphemia shooed him away with her hand. "Go on, then. No need to make a big fuss about tea."

"Tea without fuss is no tea at all," he said idly as he began heading toward the restaurant across the lobby.

"Ignore him," she told James, "and tell me everything."

James sent her a flat look and crossed his arms. "Right," he said, not bothering to hide any of his annoyance. "Well, straight after we got to the fantasy suite, you’ll never believe what we did."

"What?" she asked eagerly.

"We changed into footie pajamas and went to bed. Being a complete gentleman, I slept on the floor. I did take the duvet and half the pillows, though, since that seemed fair." He almost added that Lily was definitely into bedroom fairness, but that was actually true and therefore off limits.

Euphemia scoffed. "Fine, don’t share anything with your beloved mother who asked you to fulfill her dying wish. But you understand that now I won’t give you any information about Bonnie quitting."

He laughed. "Oh, come on, you’re dying to tell me."

Her look of faux-outrage fell apart at once. "Well," she said. "Now that you’ve harassed me for details… I’ll tell you. But only to stop you from prying any further."

James gave a lazy wave for her to continue.

"No one saw it coming!" she began. "They’d already booked her a ticket home for this afternoon, but she said she’d get back herself and ran off first thing this morning. Apparently she said she wanted to enjoy some time on her own in France." Euphemia leaned in with her gossip-hound grin. "Rita doesn’t know what I do, though. The crew are too afraid to tell her, but whoever was keeping an eye on the girls’ corridor fell asleep again. Bonnie slipped into Isabella’s room—they’ve been good mates ever since Isabella moved in with her instead of Helena—"

"Smart choice."

"Extremely. So I imagine they were saying their goodbyes, but around one in the morning, Bonnie ran out of Isabella’s room in tears. The crew member on guard woke up, of course...especially when Bonnie called Isabella a coward and sprinted back to her own room."

"No," James said, eyes wide. "Coward?"

"Yes! I heard it from the man himself. No mistake about it."

"Coward…" James’s mouth tilted to an angle. "That’s such a weird thing to say. Unless they were playing truth or dare, but they seem...not the type." He paused. "Then again, sometimes it’s the ones you least expect…"

"Well. My theory is that Bonnie wanted you to pick her mate Isabella, and she couldn’t understand
why Isabella wouldn’t join you in the suite to seal the deal."

He raised his eyebrows. If only he’d been able to raise just the one—the effect was so much more dramatic. "Is that really enough to get Bonnie to cry? She’s never seemed the type to weep like a willow."

"I nearly cried in frustration when you kept insisting how much you fancied Isabella, so I can relate. Although in this case Bonnie was dead wrong since Lily is a much better match for you than Isabella. Serves Bonnie right to be crying over it. That pain she could have caused you!"

James scrubbed a hand through his hair. "It seems just as likely that...I dunno, Bonnie dared her to ride a sheep or something."

"The good news is that you’re in a position to find out what happened from Isabella. But do it after we meet her—don’t ask in front of me, I don’t want to seem too nosy."

James heaved a sigh. He could ask Isabella about Bonnie, yeah, but it was really so much lower on his priority list than literally everything else. "I can’t wait to be done with this show," he told her, "and then never discuss my love life with you again."

Rita pulled Lily into a confessional almost as soon as she'd finished blow-drying her hair.

She was luckier than James, who had been forced to tear himself away from the steamy little bubble they'd established in the shower, dry himself in a hurry, and race to the door with his trousers half-on.

Lily’s altogether tidier appearance didn’t deter Rita from trying to prise every detail of their night together, along with an emotional confession of undying love, from Lily’s lips. She grew so quickly frustrated by the reticence of her newly christened "star contestant" that Lily eventually threw her a bone and admitted that she and James got along well, and that she liked him, and could see them having fun together in the future.

It wouldn’t be embarrassing when it turned out to be true.

Following the confessional, Rita caught Lily up on Bonnie’s abrupt departure and forbade her to see Isabella—who had already left for her date—until they filmed the finale.

"I expect that will be difficult for you, thinking of poor Isabella being kept in the dark," she said, smiling evilly. "You’re so very pious, after all."

"It suits me just fine," Lily replied, shrugging. "James should be the one to tell her, and he’ll figure something out."

Rita scowled then, and sent Lily back to her own room.

Under normal circumstances, Lily never would have considered making a long-distance call from a hotel room, even if she wasn’t paying the bill. Rita deserved to be inconvenienced in every possible way, however, so it was with a clear conscience that she flopped onto the bed, cradled the receiver to her ear and called Beatrice, who had given Lily her number before she left the castle.

"I miss you so much and I also have news," she said the second Beatrice answered, smiling at the sound of her friend’s voice. "It’s Lily, by the way. Did I mention that I miss you and have news?"

"Of course you have news, you’re a bloody journalist," Bea replied, prompting an amused snort
from Lily. "How’s France?"

"Buttery."

Beatrice spluttered out a laugh. "If that’s some sort of euphemism—"

"Of course not!" Lily yelped. "I’m obviously talking about the pastries."

"Oh yeah, Remus called last night and told me that you might be enjoying some pastries."

"Did he now?"

Beatrice made a pleased humming noise down the phone. "I was just wondering if you had a good time last night, that’s all. With the pastries. That you were innocently enjoying. In James’s hotel room."

"I enjoyed a few pastries last night, as it happens." Lily leaned back against her headboard, curling her toes into the duvet, her face feeling pleasantly warm. "And one in the shower this morning."

"Oh, how full you must be." She could hear the amusement in Bea’s voice. "I’ve never sampled a such a nutritious treat in the shower. How does one go about partaking?"

"Partaking requires some flexibility, but mostly what you need is an open mind," said Lily wisely, "and a shower mat with excellent traction."

"You dirty bitch."

"I’d argue that I’m quite clean," Lily countered. "I was in that shower for a good forty minutes."

Beatrice responded with a filthy cackle. "The only thing I love more than being right is being so right that my best friend gets an orgasm out of the deal."

"Well, you were right several times."

"That’s my girl."

Lily smiled at the ceiling, and twirled the phone cord around her fingers, and sighed. "I guess he likes me. A lot." The warm, happy feeling in her chest hadn’t eased off since he’d dashed back into the bathroom to hurriedly kiss her goodbye. "A lot a lot."

"I’m shocked. Truly. Hang on while I pick myself up off the floor."

"And I guess I like him...more than I wanted to admit out loud."

"My jaw just dropped so hard it detached itself."

"He really does want to go traveling with me," Lily said. "He’s like, all in, which is crazy, right? We shouldn’t be making plans like that right away, and I was saving for hostels and backpacks but he’s got so much money and says I deserve everything and thinks that twenty croissants is a reasonable, non-extravagant gift, and he had this idea for the prop—"

"Lil," said Beatrice sternly, "I love you, but you’re a total overthinker, and you’re head over heels for an underthinker, so what does that tell you?"

"He’s not an underthinker, he’s spontaneous."
"God, you're so gone and it's revolting," said Bea, "but calm down a bit, yeah? You've got a lot of time to go until you travel, and the two of you will have it figured out by then. You'll find a balance."

Balance. That was an interesting word.

Lily loved that James was spontaneous. It didn’t suit him to hold anything back, and so he’d struggled to keep his feelings from her—which had seemed so confusing at the time but now made perfect sense.

He would need to start thinking *some* things through, because a lack of forethought sometimes led him to make silly choices, like deciding on Isabella after five minutes, but Lily would be there help with that in future. She overthought so many things. She'd never much given way to spontaneity until she'd met James, who made her want to throw caution to the wind and kiss him, touch him, travel the world with him, be stupidly, giddily infatuated, because beneath that heady excitement was the steadfast notion that she'd found exactly what she needed, and everything was going to be fine.

Beatrice was right. They both needed a balance, and they'd found that, perhaps, in each other.

That was such a lovely thought.

"I'll take that under advisement," she agreed, shuffling down further on her bed. "Now, I have to tell you *all* about the ballet..."

Once she’d said goodbye to Beatrice, Lily texted her mum to confirm that she and James were together. Grace replied with the same brand of snarky, feigned surprise that she’d gotten from Bea. James was a darling and welcome back at the house whenever he wanted, she assured her daughter. Lily could even come with him, if she was a very good girl and ate all her vegetables.

After that, she took a long nap, because she hadn’t got much sleep the night before.

By the time she woke up, almost everyone involved with the show had gone to Étretat for the day, which left Lily free to do as she pleased without fear of repercussions. After getting dressed, she shouldered her purse, grabbed a map from the hotel lobby, and set out on a leisurely stroll. One of Rita's lingering producer stooges made a feeble effort to convince her to stay, but she ignored him.

There wasn't much that Rita could do to her now. Since Bonnie had quit unexpectedly in the night, kicking Lily off the show would mean there wouldn’t be a finale to speak of.

She took a walk to the Arc de Triomphe and then through Monceau Park, pausing several times along the way to take pictures on her phone and buy macarons in Ladurée. Wonderful as if had been to visit the Louvre with Euphemia, and then the ballet with Sirius, there was a singular kind of contentment to be found in wandering through the city completely unchaperoned.

It would have been more fun with James, who mumbled nonsense in his sleep and loved having his neck kissed and truly despised France, but felt it was worth enduring if it made Lily happy.

Soon, she kept thinking. She'd have him all to herself soon.

They couldn't be seen together in public until after the finale aired, but Lily could easily live with that. James's signature may have been forged by his mother, but he was getting paid to do the show and his parents had a lucrative advertising deal with the production company. Not for anything would Lily encourage him to break the terms of his contract and land his family in hot water.
She’d get Rita back for the both of them, when her article came out.

Lily had texted Rufus to confirm that she would be winning the show—but keeping the accompanying boyfriend, thank you very much—so he’d decided to publish her piece in conjunction with the finale for maximum impact. If the show proved as popular as all asinine reality shows in Britain generally did, there would be no way to avoid making a splash with her exposé.

Rita could edit and tweak and present whatever narrative she wanted, but as soon as it came out that the winner of the show had been a plant from the beginning, it would undermine her efforts.

Unlike James, Lily was under no obligation to follow the terms of her contract because she’d never signed one in the first place. That had been handled by Rufus, whose scrawled imitation of her signature did not remotely resemble the real thing. The true liability for Lily’s spot on the show lay with him and his fact-checker friend, who would obviously claim ignorance. Rufus had been thorough in his deceptions, and Rita would never be able to prove that her employee hadn’t simply made a mistake.

In any case, the Prophet had orchestrated and survived similar undercover missions, and could take the accompanying heat. It wasn’t illegal to lie to a production company, but if it were, Lily’s only crime had been to impersonate herself. Rita was the one who chided, insulted, and physically struck the stars of her precious show.

Rita Skeeter could crow all she wanted, but there was nothing she could do to stop the truth from coming out.

Let her do her worst.

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Once Rita had returned from filming Lily’s confessional, and then blatantly refusing to share any details of what Lily had said with James, she filed James and his family into a van. Fleamont asked if she wanted to drive with Isabella, since surely it would be more comfortable to stretch out in a less full vehicle, but Rita insisted on joining them.

"Isabella’s no one to scheme with," Rita said with a narrow look at James.

"Oi," he said, climbing into the car. "We made a deal. I stand by my deals."

"And you absolutely will if I prevent you from reneging on it. Forcefully."

He rolled his eyes and clambered into the long seat in the back row, where he settled in next to his dad. Rita moved on to arguing with Sirius over the front seat, one that she somehow lost, even though she was technically his employer. Sirius was just like that, with his dashing good looks and switch-on, switch-off charm.

Sirius could have the front seat all he liked, James thought smugly. James had his dad at his side for the next few hours, which meant he’d finally get a sane bit of conversation.

He quickly brought his dad up to speed as the van wove its way out of Paris and into the country.

As soon as James mentioned his archery lesson with Isabella, a deep frown formed on Fleamont’s face.

"Euphemia," he said in a warning voice. "You let him shoot arrows?"
"Hm?" she said innocently, even though she had been laughing at some of James’s memories the whole trip. "Of course I did. Why shouldn’t I?"

"Perhaps because the only time you took him to an archery range before, he left with a mysteriously broken toe and a lifetime ban from the range? Or possibly because we later received several harassing phone calls demanding we pay for the irreparable damages to the drink cart umbrella?"

"Half of that was my fault," Sirius chimed in from the front.

"Excuse me," James retorted, "it was ninety percent your fault. I would never have aimed an arrow in that direction if someone hadn’t been telling me it’d be a laugh—"

"This was decades ago," Euphemia said, waving her hand in the air. "Who can even remember anything from that age?"

Fleamont gave a long-suffering sigh and looked out the window. After a moment, he turned back to James.

"I do hope," he said, "that your excursion ended injury-free."

"Tragically, no," Sirius said before James could reply. "James’s ego suffered a massive hit when Isabella ended up with ten times his score. Or rather, it would’ve been ten times his score if he’d had any score, but as multiplying by zero results in zero...well. You see what I’m getting at."

Fleamont nodded sagely. "I do."

"Betrayal!" James cried. "I have fantastic sport skills. Why would you think I’d be so bad at archery?"

"I return once more to the aforementioned instance in which you returned from an archery range with a mysteriously broken toe and a—"

"Fine, fine, don’t believe in your son. Whatever. I don’t care." James crossed his arms and stared out his own window.

He couldn’t hold out forever, though, and eventually Fleamont drew the rest of the show’s "adventures" out of him. They had more than two hours in the car to cover several weeks of events, and that was how long it took for James to get through it all, thanks to the constant James-deprecating commentary from Sirius and Euphemia. They didn’t let up for even minutes at a time.

This didn’t change once they’d been unloaded on top of a seaside cliff for a picnic. The sun sparkled on the ocean several hundred feet below them, turning the stone cliffs below them to soft gold.

The crew had made it here ahead of them. They’d placed beach stones on the edges of a checkerboard blanket to keep it from blowing away in the sea breeze, as well as a wicker basket overflowing with an array of presumably French "delicacies."

James would never have admitted it aloud, but this would have been an exceptionally calm and picturesque place for a date, if he hadn’t been trying to break up with the woman about to join them. And if it weren’t for his family—awkward date material—and the horde of crew and cameras.

Also the part where they were in France and not literally anywhere else in the world.
It might’ve been worse in the middle of the Australian outback...but maybe just slightly. Except even there he could see a kangaroo, so that still would’ve topped France.

At least this was better than the horror show of the catacombs. That was something.

Isabella seemed a bit grim-faced when she stepped out of the car, but the view seized her attention immediately, coaxing out a small smile.

"Hi," he said as she approached.

Shit. What if she tried to kiss him?

She probably wouldn’t. They hadn’t really at all, and his parents were right there. She’d likely go for the hug—

And she did, ultimately, looping her thin arms around James’s chest. But not for long.

"Hello," she said, without any of the bounce she’d had on the boat in Oxford. "It’s absolutely stunning here. I’ve always heard such good things about Étretat."

James managed to mostly suppress a grimace. "Sure," he said. "And, ah, these are my parents, Euphemia and Fleamont. Sirius you know well, obviously. Or, ah, as well as you can know the host of your show… Except not really, since we know the other host really got to know someone…"

"James," warned Rita from a distance.

"Right," he said, shaking his head. "Anyway. Mum and Dad, this is Isabella."

"I’ve heard quite a lot about you," Fleamont said, offering out his hand.

Euphemia, of course, took a much more hands-on approach, engulfing Isabella’s lithe frame in a smothering hug. James didn’t worry much about Isabella breaking—she was the fittest and strongest person he’d ever met—but even body builders required regular oxygen flow to their lungs.

Isabella’s eyes had gone a bit wide and shocked when the hug finally ended. James’s heart clenched—that was exactly the sort of unreserved hug Isabella needed from a parent, and had almost certainly never received.

Fleamont stared down at his unshaken hand and sighed. "Anyway," he said. "It’s a pleasure to meet you."

"You too," said Isabella, still slightly stunned. "And I do know Sirius, although it’ll be nice to chat a bit more than usual."

Sirius only lifted his hand in greeting. Considering how dull he found Isabella, even that meager gesture showed significant effort on Sirius’s part. James gave him an upward nod of approval.

Sirius rolled his eyes and gestured to the picnic. "Shall we?" he said. A second later he pulled a face. "Oh, fuck. What has this show turned me into?"

Euphemia placed a hand on his back. "Someone more polite and inviting, apparently. My sympathies."

Sirius kicked at the ground with his ratty trainers—his typical hosting suit had been abandoned to
distinguish his role today from his typical one—and uttered more curses under his breath.

"Not worth it," he announced, and practically threw himself down onto the blanket, where he sat with his arms tightly crossed.

"After you," James said to Isabella.

Euphemia grabbed Isabella’s hand and pulled her down to the blanket. "So," she began, "I understand that you’re a fitness instructor. It really takes someone special to teach, you know."

"Absolutely agreed," Fleamont said as he joined them. "They make or break people’s interest in entire fields. For instance, my absolutely atrocious art teacher in primary turned me off of it for the rest of my life."

"It’s true," Euphemia told Isabella. "He refuses to even enter art museums. They give him hives."

Isabella sent a look of concern toward Fleamont as James settled in next to her. "That sounds awfully serious. Have you seen a doctor about it?"

"She’s joking," Fleamont said. "Our son received his love of blathering on from one of his parents. I leave it to you to make your own conclusions about which one, of course."

"Shall we," Sirius muttered to himself, staring down at the blanket.

Euphemia patted his knee. "Your natural snark will come back, dear. I know it will." Then she turned back to Isabella. "I also recall that you were interested in someday starting your own business."

"Er," said Isabella, looking quickly at James. "Yes. I—maybe. When I’m much older and more experienced."

"Nonsense," Euphemia said. "My husband started his business at twenty-five and never looked back."

"That’s not strictly true," Fleamont said.

"And now he has an empire. Now, naturally you don’t want to follow his course exactly—we don’t need the competition so don’t even think about it—but he has loads of advice he can share with you about being an entrepreneur in a completely different field."

Isabella sent a mildly panicked look at James.

"So," he said loudly. "You might be wondering why Sirius is here when he’s not related to me—"

"We adopted him in every sense but the legal one," Euphemia said. "Now, the first thing you’ll need is a business plan—"

"He moved in with us when he was sixteen," James continued.

Sirius had perked up at the sound of his name. "Best thing I ever did, leaving my shit family."

"This isn’t about you," Euphemia scolded.

"Well put," Fleamont said. "Perhaps we should all take a moment to ponder who this is about, and what they might like to do with this time."
"Not subtle enough by half, dear."

He gestured out toward the ocean, where several sailboats dotted the horizon. "Forgive me. I find it difficult to reach for subtlety in such a dramatic location."

"Forgiven, but as I was saying, Isabella, you must start thinking about your target audience—"

She stubbornly went on about Isabella’s future studio while the rest of them snacked on the picnic. To James’s chagrin, the cheese was delicious and soft.

Isabella listened to Euphemia mutely at first, seemingly in shock, but eventually she began asking questions and soliciting Euphemia’s advice on branding techniques.

Rita looked vaguely murderous, her hands clawing at the air at her sides. James muffled a laugh. A lesson in business was excellent advice for Isabella, but it would probably have all the show’s viewers changing the channel. Or fast-forwarding to later on their computer, because honestly, who still watched television live anymore?

The best, sweetest part was that Rita had no recourse. Euphemia had leverage over her, and besides, she wasn’t actually violating any show rules or even James’s agreement with Rita. Isabella was getting what she needed for long-term success, and Rita got nothing. Sweet, sweet victory, delivered at his mother’s hands, as usual.

Eventually Rita bit out that they had enough footage and made the crew scramble to pick up the picnic, even as James and the others were just stepping off the blanket. She separated Isabella again, which was still incredibly stupid and pointless, and directed James and Euphemia to their own van.

"Cheers," he told his mum once they’d headed off to the second part of the date. "That was brilliant."

She bowed her head in acknowledgment. "All I ask for in return is the story of what happened between Bonnie and Isabella."

"Yeah, no."

"What do you mean, no?"

"Hm?" He gestured toward the sunny fields of grass on either side of the car. "Sorry, can’t hear you, I’m going through a tunnel."

She lightly punched his shoulder, her lips thinned and at a slant. "Fine," she said. "But don’t expect any more saves from me on this show. I can see how my kindness is repaid."

She pouted the whole ten minutes it took them to arrive at a posh golf course overlooking the sea. James had to admit the scenery would make for excellent television.

So would his somewhat last-minute reversal of roles.

He had to take his last chance to somehow warn Isabella. He just couldn’t think of the right words.

*Oh, so, I know we were basically almost betrothed...but jk I kinda like someone else, sorry.*

Or more mature: *My dearest Isabella. I have much enjoyed our time together. Alas, tragically my true affections lie elsewhere.*
Or maybe he could couch it in some sort of allegorical tale involving a crab and a sheep…

He’d come up with exactly zero plan by the time he met Isabella at the first hole, two crew members lugging along their rented golf clubs.

"Er, hi again," he said.

"Hello," she said, and moved toward him, arms lifting slightly. Then she stopped and pretended she hadn’t just almost maybe hugged him. "So, ah, d’you like golf?"

"Well," he said, "I have been known to call it the sport people watch to fall asleep."

She smiled faintly. "Have you ever played, though? It’s a real challenge for the mind."

"Yes," he agreed, "it’s a real challenge staying awake for it."

Maybe this was the way to make it clear they were better suited to other people: highlight their differences.

"So," he added, "you a big golf fan, then?"

"It’s not my favorite, but I used to play more often. My—well, my ex taught me how to play."

"Oh. What was he like?"

Bringing up the exes. That was either emotional progress or an explosive topic. Hopefully the latter. As much as Isabella could be explosive.

She cut her eyes down to her bag, where she deftly extracted her driver. "My ex was...thoughtful. Precise. Kind."

"Why’d you break up?"

"There were...it was...it’s difficult to explain," she said with a glance at the nearest camera.

"Sorry, forget I asked."

"No, it’s fine..." She focused on placing her golf ball on the tee.

Pushing for the ex story was, in hindsight, a bit over the top. He wouldn't want to detail all his break-ups on camera either. But there were other things he could ask. Other areas of difference to explore.

"Where d’you see yourself living long-term?" he asked on the next hole. "D’you plan to stay in Oxford?"

"Of course. I couldn’t leave my family."

He made a noncommittal noise. He couldn’t outright say he planned to be in London for a good long while, or that he’d live in France before he’d live in Oxford. Not in the least because the latter wasn’t true, but also because he caught Rita’s warning look behind Isabella. Stating his intentions might be a step too far.

"What d’you like about Oxford?" he asked before she could turn the question toward him.

"The charm," she said, resting her hands on top of her putter. "It’s cozy and old and there’s so much
history. I don’t know nearly enough about it, to be honest, but Bonnie always said—" She broke off, pink tinging her cheeks as she cut her gaze out toward the ocean. "The architecture has always amazed me, too."

James looked down into his bag while trying to figure out which club was his putter. The driver was easy to identify—big, heavy, could easily be used to shatter someone’s femur—but all the other ones looked the same.

"Er," he said, loudly knocking some of the clubs around. "It’s, ah, good you like it there."

A large sigh escaped Isabella. "I’m sorry," she said. "I’m not—I’m in a bit of a mood today, and it’s nothing to do with you."

He glanced up to find her staring down at her golf shoes. "Oh, hey," he said, straightening up. "Don’t worry about it. I, er...heard some things. About...last night."

She fixed her soft brown eyes on him, her eyebrows drawing together and her lips pressing thin. "You did?" she asked tightly.

"Just that, ah." He cleared his throat. "That Bonnie quit and said...something to you. That’s all I know. And I know you were, um, close."

Her shoulders unbunched. "Yes," she said in a rush. "We were close mates. And I wasn’t—expecting her to leave. Not like that."

"No. It was...surprising."

"I mean, we both knew—or thought, really, that at the ceremony… Well. She didn’t expect to get this far."

"Yeah, uh, it’s not like you two misread the situation…” He coughed. "I mean, she’s great, don’t get me wrong—"

"No, I—I know what you mean. I do." She shook her head, the few strands of hair on the sides of her face swaying, then smiled. "We do get each other, don’t we?"

"Uh, yeah," he said helplessly. "We do."

She nodded out toward the ocean. "I could see a Bond movie happening here, you know. A villain chasing after him so he has to jump off the cliffs."

For being someone he had, in all earnestness, said that he understood deeply, he had no clue where she was going. Puzzling her out today was like navigating French geography, which James of course knew nothing about.

"I guess. I’m loathe to praise this loathsome country," he said, "but him jumping off anything that high into the ocean would be cinematic."

"It would be appropriately dangerous. Swinburne almost drowned here, you know."

"Who?"

"Algernon Charles Swinburne. You know, the poet? The driver told me on the way here—she grew up in the area."

"Oh," James said. "Er, all right."
"Is that who you named Algernon after?"

"Ah, no. I didn’t name him after anyone. It’s just...a name."

"Oh. I thought maybe we both named our cats after books-related things."

"Yours are named after books?"

"Yes," she said quickly. "You should take your shot, you know. The sun’s starting to get low."

"Oh. Right."

By the end of nine holes, he couldn’t say that he’d succeeded at his mission of dropping hints. Then again, he couldn’t say he’d failed either.

Whatever had been easy to read about Isabella had disappeared. Instead he was left with someone who wasn’t clinging to him but also wasn’t verbally giving signals that she was picking up his meaning. He tried every method he could to indirectly point out they weren’t going to be a great match, and it wasn’t like anyone had ever accused him of subtlety before. Surely she’d got the point...

Maybe she did get it but was trying to save face? Or maybe she had a brain infection that was making her act all weird.

Either way, by the time they awkwardly hugged each other goodbye at the ninth hole, James had a sinking feeling that she was in for a rude shock at the final ceremony.

Lily never would have thought she'd experience the strange phenomenon of knowing that her boyfriend was on a date with somebody else.

Experience it she did, however, and she bore up admirably. It helped that she wasn't remotely worried.

At least, she wasn't worried for herself.

Rita had been right. It was difficult for Lily to think of Isabella being lied to, and it seemed highly likely that Rita would have made some insane threat to keep James from telling her the truth.

She hoped that James had managed to get a few hints in, and that the finale they were scheduled to film in a couple of days wouldn't see her friend taken completely aback. Isabella was stronger than she believed, Lily knew. Once she escaped the reality television bubble, she'd likely see that she and James weren't suited and get over it, but public shame and rejection was an entirely different beast.

Lily hated the idea that she'd somehow become party to another woman's pain. Having feelings for James when she'd believed he didn't want her had been deeply unpleasant, but she had still slept better when she only had her own heart to worry about.

It took her a long time to drop off that night, preoccupied with concern for Isabella, who seemed to be heading towards an unavoidable humiliation, and for James, who was inevitably going to feel like a prick for having caused it. She suspected she would have slept more comfortably if she’d been tucked up with him in his suite, though Rita certainly wouldn’t allow it. There was probably a way to barter with her somehow, but they’d definitely have to pay for that privilege on camera and Lily didn't much feel like selling out her soul.
Eventually, though, she did sleep, and woke up late the next morning—after a very strange and possibly prophetic dream in which Euphemia took her for a coffee only to reveal that she’d had Lily’s bridal gown commissioned by Vera Wang—with not much time to spare before she had to leave to meet James’s family, so she skipped breakfast in favor of getting ready.

It was with an achingly empty tummy that she climbed into the car that was to take her to Giverny, desperate for a cup of tea and slightly fearful that the show was going to end with Euphemia announcing that she’d been ordained online and would be officiating Lily and James’s surprise wedding ceremony on camera.

By the time she reached her destination—a quaint cottage with jade green window shutters, nestled amongst ivy and rows of lavender—Lily was feeling quite nervous, though she wasn't sure if the butterflies in her tummy were down to meeting James's father for the first time, or all the banging they’d done in his hotel room.

How was she supposed to greet James, in light of what they’d done? Kiss him like they were an accepted fact? Act cool and unaffected? The former felt like giving Rita what she wanted, but the latter felt completely insincere.

They should have planned for this in advance, she thought, annoyed with herself as she stepped out of the car, just like they'd settled on what they'd do for his proposal.

It turned out that her worries were unfounded, for when Lily was led into the cottage gardens, she barely had time to register the tartan picnic blanket and accompanying basket before Euphemia pounced on her, pulling her into a bone-crushing hug. Evidently, she wasn't interested in pretending to the cameras that she'd never met Lily before, though Lily had never been careful about that either.

"Oh, I've missed you," Euphemia sighed in her ear.

"Um," Lily replied, her arms pinned to her sides by the sudden attack. "Thank you?"

She normally did quite well with the parents of guys she dated, but Euphemia's ever-growing enthusiasm was something beyond the pale.

"Scientifically speaking, Mum, you can’t hold onto her forever."

"Please, don't give her that challenge," said Lily, unable to see James from her current position, half-suffocated by his mother's loving embrace. "I missed you too, Euphemia, but my ribs…"

Euphemia pulled out of the hug but didn't let Lily go completely, holding her at arm's length so that she could fuss over her.

"You look utterly lovely, dear," she told her, smiling indulgently as she brushed something nonexistent from her shoulder. "Simply glowing. It just shows what the first flush of true love can do to a girl's complexion."

If Lily did happen to be glowing, it was from sheer embarrassment at this proclamation.

There was no polite way to tell Euphemia that she was getting way ahead of herself, and considering how she and James were already so sure of their relationship that they’d committed to taking a round-the-world trip together in a year, it would also be completely hypocritical.

"That'll be the sea salt face masks they give us at the hotel," she replied, while her cheeks burned like someone was holding her head over a hot griddle. "This is actually the first flush of sodium
She tossed James a glance that she hoped contained a subtly-delivered cry for rescue from his mother's clutches, as well as a general appreciation for how tall and handsome and generally appealing he was. It was extremely difficult to demonstrate such starkly opposing sentiments at once.

"You haven’t met my dad," James said immediately. He grabbed his dad’s arm and shoved him toward Lily. "Here, this is him."

"Hello," said Fleamont with a warm smile. He looked so much like his son that Lily would have guessed they were related if she'd bumped into him in the street. "I am indeed James’s father. Who has a name, but no one seems to care much about it."

"It’s Fleamont," Euphemia supplied. "Such a handsome name, don’t you think?"

"I think it's very unique," said Lily diplomatically, finally managing to extract herself from Euphemia's grasp, "and Sirius told me your name the other day, so you can take comfort in the fact that he cares, at least."

"Did he?" Fleamont said, tilting his head, his smile broadening. "Well, that is a relief. He’s never been one for showing much affection."

"I’m insulted," Sirius said.

"You’re arguing you’re affectionate? Or that you don’t care?"

Sirius shut his mouth mutinously. "Whatever," he said, and threw himself down to sit on the picnic blanket.

Lily cocked her head to the side as she took in this minor tantrum, then she returned her gaze to Fleamont's face.

"You're the sensible one, yes?" she asked him. "I figured one of you had to be."

"It is a challenging but necessary role," he said. "I’d heard you were clever and I do appreciate that that bore out. Please have a seat. If you’re to be the other sensible one among us, I believe we’ll both need a glass of wine."

Wine on an empty stomach didn't seem like an idea that would be appreciated by a sensible person such as herself, but with Euphemia in such high spirits, it also seemed quite tempting. Besides which, the spread of appetizing snacks and pastries laid on the blanket would hopefully counteract the booze.

Lily took a seat on the picnic blanket next to Fleamont and across from a sullen looking Sirius.

"Sit next to me?" she said to James, who was still standing by his mother.

He grinned and dropped into place next to her, then pecked a kiss on her cheek. "For the record, I also missed you. More than my mum, probably. I mean, I really hope so."

"I think so," she said, and slipped her hand inside his, trying to ignore his mother, who had circled the blanket to sit next to Sirius and was beaming at them both like a devoted stalker. "I missed—"

"I think we’ve established," Sirius said, his voice ringing, "that everyone missed everyone, and we
can now move onto more interesting topics."

"Except my dad," James said.

"No," Fleamont said, "I missed the three of you while you’ve been filming."

"But you saw us yesterday."

"Ah, true. In that case, I allow Sirius’s comment to stand."

"Never mind that," said Euphemia impatiently. "What we really want to discuss is how Lily enjoyed her night in the fantasy suite."

Lily would have been willing to bet her piano that only Euphemia cared about that.

Her and Rita, who was undoubtedly out for all the fun, sexy details she could scrape together.

What, realistically, could Euphemia have been expecting her to say? Oh, Euphemia, your son is simply tremendous in the sack, not to mention an animal in the shower, which by the way was logistically unsound but worth it for the massage jet attachments. Vive la France!

Lily had come prepared for such a line of questioning.

"Oh, well, you know it was the fantasy suite, so we watched the entire Lord of the Rings trilogy in our pajamas," she said innocently, reaching for the glass of wine that Fleamont had poured and was holding out for her to take. "Then we went straight to sleep. You should be really proud of James, who was an absolute gentleman and took the floor."

"Then when we woke up," he added, "we watched The Princess Bride and practiced sword fighting."

Lily wished she could high-five her partner in crime-fighting without immediately giving the game away, but she settled on squeezing his hand.

"With baguettes. There's loads of them lying around," she concluded, and smiled at Fleamont, launching her defense before Euphemia could ask again. "What have you been up to while these lot were filming?"

"The time alone has allowed me to spend some time on my hobbies," he confessed. "My bonsai trees have never been so well-trimmed before, and I am now fully up to date on my Yelp reviews. My backlog list was growing quite long."

"He also bought a selfie stick," Euphemia said. "He kept sending selfies to me so I wouldn’t feel lonely. He’s improved greatly."

"Ah, yes." He nodded gravely. "And the art of the selfie. Strangely necessary in this day and age."

"I particularly enjoyed your cooking selfies."

"I admit, my favorite to date was me with my tahdig."

"Are you the chef in your house, then?" asked Lily. "Or is that a shared responsibility? I live with two other people who swear by the microwave, so I generally have the oven to myself."

"My love of chemistry has indeed carried over into the kitchen. Tragically, however, I have no pupil to pass my knowledge onto."

"Really?" Lily looked at James. "Didn’t he teach you?"

"I mean, you’ve met me," he said. "Are you really surprised I’m rubbish in the kitchen?"

"I think you’re brilliant and could do most things you put your mind to, so yes, I am surprised," said Lily, and sent him a flat look. "Are you actually rubbish, or do you just assume you would be?"

She was, perhaps, being a little cheeky in front of Fleamont and Euphemia. She wasn’t sure if they would thank her for it, but if the alternative option was to pretend that she’d be perfectly justified in having low expectations of James, Lily figured she could take the hit.

"The third time he tried to teach me," James said, "we all had to leave the first floor of the house. Did you know that if you burn certain types of peppers that it diffuses into the air and sends you into coughing fits?"

"It was unpleasant," Fleamont admitted.

Euphemia patted James’s knee. "Not your finest moment."

"Okay, but during this pepper burning fiasco, had you asked him to teach you or had he offered?" Lily continued. "I think one's level of interest lends itself directly to how much effort gets put in."

"You think as a thirteen-year-old I was desperate for cooking lessons?"

"He wanted to go play football," Fleamont said.

"So he burned the peppers on purpose. I'm with you." Lily took a sip of her wine. "What kind of food do you like cook?"

"Mostly South Indian cuisine, as it's the food of my childhood, but I like to dabble in a little bit of everything."

"Right." She turned her attentions back to James. "Ever thought of trying to learn now that you're, you know, not prepubescent?"

"My plan has been for my dad to live forever and keep supplying me with my fix. So far it’s worked perfectly."

"And while it's great that you've cracked the secret to eternal life, didn't you say you wanted to start a family?"

He frowned. "Yeah?"

"And, okay—supposing, just for the sake of argument, mind, that one day you and I got married—"

Euphemia let out a dramatic little gasp that could have single-handedly won her a starring role on any telenovela of her choosing.

"Again, this is just for the sake of argument," Lily continued, keeping her eyes on James and not on his overeager mother. "Not having any Indian heritage myself, I know nothing about the culture or traditions or food, and I'd learn about it for your sake, but the primary responsibility for passing that down to your children should be yours, right? I'll note once more that this is a completely hypothetical scenario which could apply to numerous women," she added, sensing Euphemia's excitement expanding like a balloon.
"Committing much?" Sirius commented. "Save your proposal for tomorrow."

"I was making a point about the importance of adult life skills, not proposing," said Lily calmly, "nor was I crying at the ballet, unlike someone I could mention."

Sirius muttered something unintelligible and reached for a piece of brie.

James raised his eyebrows at Lily. "It sounds like you'd be an excellent student for my dad's teachings. Then one of us would have the information."

Cheeky git.

"I'll learn if you agree to learn too," Lily returned, "in the interest of equality, and all. You don't get to be seen in public with your eventual girlfriend until after the show has aired, remember?" She shrugged, and let go of his hand to reach for a smoked salmon blini that was slathered in cream cheese. "Sounds like a lot of nights indoors to me."

The blini was delicious. Salmon was a truly magnificent fish.

"It is," Euphemia put in. "But you two won't want to spend that time cooking, surely. Not when you could occupy yourselves...in other ways..."

"That's true, but you need energy to sustain yourself for long Monopoly tournaments, and food gives you energy," Lily turned back to James. "Well?"

He sighed as if he had been deeply put upon, but Lily knew him well enough to know that he was secretly pleased by her faith in him. "I suppose there are worse ways to pass a few weeks. After all, we could be stuck in France the whole time."

"I promise," said Lily solemnly, "that I will never ask you to return to France. Or drink French wine. Or eat French food, except for French fries. Those I'll buy for you."

"They're actually Belgian, thank you. Don't taint such a delicious food with the horrific French imprint." He nodded. "But also, thank you. I will absolutely be holding you to that."

"Has it occurred to anyone," Fleamont wondered aloud, "that I may not be available for the next several weeks for cooking lessons?"

"We'll clear your schedule," Euphemia told him, her eyes narrowing. "This is important."

"Oh, I wasn't assuming that you'd just give up your time like that," said Lily to Fleamont. "Sometimes I get carried away when I'm on my high horse. It's a terrible flaw of mine. Please don't cancel anything on my account."

"Oh," Fleamont said, "I am free. I simply wanted to make a point."

"I'm offended that nobody thought to invite me to one of these cooking lessons," said Sirius.

"No you aren't," said Lily.

Sirius scowled, and pilfered another piece of cheese. "You don't know my life."

"Now, Sirius," said Euphemia mournfully, "how on earth are they supposed to have a romantic time with you there?"

"If you also want to learn, nobody's stopping you," Lily pointed out.
"No thanks, Duchess," said Sirius, with a tight smile. "I'll taste-test James's creations. Succumbing to food poisoning seems like as good a way as any to shuffle off this mortal coil."

"He reads too much Russian literature," James confided in Lily. "It’s made him morbid."

"Oh, I know, he gave me a copy of Anna Karenina that was heavily annotated with very strong opinions." Lily replied, smiling at him. "Might as well poison him, really. Give him what he wants."

James swiveled his head to look at Sirius. "You gave her your beloved Russian literature?"

Sirius shrugged. "I like her. She's funny. You knew this already."

"I most distinctly did not. You never said that!"

"Didn't I? I'm sure it was implied."

"It was," Euphemia said.

James folded his arms. "I hate all of you. Except you, Lily." He glanced at his dad. "And I suppose you're fine, too, except for the torturous cooking lessons of my youth."

"They'll be less torturous this time around, because I'll be there and I think you're pretty cool," Lily assured him. "And if all else fails, we can always poison Sirius."

"Well," James said, "all right. So long as that's settled."

Lily could tell by his demeanor and the absence of his usual talkativeness that James hadn't had a chance to tell Isabella the truth, and that the resulting guilt and worry had put him in a lousy mood. It didn't improve much as the picnic went on, despite his best efforts to be sociable and despite the jolly time that was had by everyone else. Lily really enjoyed talking to Fleamont about his work, his hobbies, and his many memories of a younger James, and came away from the picnic feeling optimistic that she'd made a good impression.

Still, seeing James so down was frustrating. Lily should have been comforting him, listening to his worries and trying to figure out a way to fix the Isabella problem together. She couldn't, though, because of stupid Rita Skeeter, who would have taken a knife to the neck before she'd let her golden couple spend thirty seconds alone off camera.

They were even escorted separately to their solo date in Monet's garden, where two easels and an assortment of paints had been set up overlooking a gorgeous, tranquil water lily pond, despite the fact that it was only a few minutes' walk away from the picnic site.

Given her and Euphemia's recent gallery excursion and the conversation they'd had about James's hitherto unseen artistic talents, it seemed as if his mother had found the time to influence yet another date activity.

"I'm terrible at art," Lily told him when she arrived, and walked over to him with a smile on her face. He had got there first, and was standing by the easels with his hands in his pockets. "I mean, truly atrocious. I'd say that I could draw stick figures, but I wouldn't want to insult real sticks."

He strode forward, closing the gap between them, and slid his hands alongside her face, fingers tangling in her hair, and kissed her soundly.

She let out a soft, surprised noise before she kissed him back.
Lily knew that they were actively being filmed, felt Rita's cold-blooded satisfaction thrumming away from behind the camera, and could easily imagine Euphemia's delighted smile. Months from now, a TV watching nation would see James plant one on her from the comfort of their living rooms, and they'd both been hoping to avoid that very thing, but that felt insignificant at that moment, like a vaguely irritating bee buzzing away in the background.

If James wanted to kiss her more than he cared about any of that stuff, she wasn't going to care about it either.

When he pulled away, she wrapped her arms around his middle and smiled up at him.

"I don't know what I did to bring that on," she said, "but whatever it was I'm glad I did it."

His eyes widened behind his glasses. "Oh shit," he said. "I've just kissed you. On camera, I mean."

"If you consider it in the grand scheme of things, it's not the most embarrassing thing either of us have done on camera in the last few weeks."

"I mean, no, it’s not that it’s embarrassing, it’s that, er, I wasn’t exactly supposed to—"

"Hands off each other," Rita barked. "We’re shooting that entrance again."

Lily shot Rita an incredulous glare before turning back to James.

"All these weeks she spends desperate for you to cop off with someone, now we've got to pretend we're not together," she said, with a roll of her eyes. "As soon as we get out of here I'm throwing a bloody parade."

"I've always wanted to throw a parade," James confessed. "I'm so glad we have a lot of common interests."

Rita ordered Lily off-camera and had her approach James anew. He maintained a neutral expression as she walked up, his arms hanging at his sides. When she stood in front of him, he stuck on a polite smile and offered out his hand.

"Good afternoon," he said. "Lenora, was it?"

"Yeah, Lenora, let's go with that," Lily replied, and shook his hand as formally as she could. "What was your name again? Jake Peralta?"

"It’s Raymond Holt, actually. Captain Holt. I am deeply offended you’re unable to recall such basic facts about me and we will now terminate this relationship."

"That makes me feel sad. I am sad."

Rita cleared her throat loudly. "This is the sort of behavior that drives people to become sea witches." She twirled a hand in the air. "From the top, children."

"You know, this would be so much easier if you'd given us our scripts ahead of time," Lily called over.

"Can I get more fight scenes next episode?" James inquired. "I've always wanted to do a fight scene."

"Maybe Ruby Raptor is like, the strait-laced cop who does things by the book, and Jack Diamond is the hot-headed maverick who doesn't play by the rules, but we've been thrown together to crack
this one last case," Lily suggested, looking to Rita for approval. "That's as good an origin story as any. Is that our angle here? You're not giving us much to go on."

"The angle is shape up or I will force James into wearing a beret."

"You wouldn't," James breathed.

"She would," said Lily flatly, "but she won't, because I'll play along. For your sake, and the sake of your beautiful hair."

"It's too early for the l-word—not lesbian, obviously—but I will admit that I fancy you something awful."

"That's alright, I fancy you quite a lot, too." Lily turned back around and waved a dismissive hand towards Rita. "Her I could happily throw in the Seine."

She and James managed to make it through the third take without incurring any more of Rita's wrath, "greeting" each other with a friendly hug that served as an acceptable middle ground between their first two attempts. It was then explained to them—needlessly—that they were to spend their date painting, though Lily had never known an artist to help themselves to champagne and strawberries between brush strokes.

It also seemed quite wise to assume that Rita, with the help of some editorial magic, would find a way to get that kiss on air.

"I've decided that I'm going to paint in the style of the primary school era," she solemnly informed James, once they'd been put in position in front of their easels. She dipped her brush into a blob of bright red paint and smacked it against the canvas. "It's modern, see?"

"Groundbreaking," James said seriously, thoughtfully dabbing his brush into the mound of yellow paint.

"It's a very avant-garde way to disguise a complete lack of any artistic talent."

"I think you should go for something more realistic." He flung his arms out sideways, inadvertently flinging a small paint bomb off into the distance. "Paint me like one of your French girls."

"I mean, I would," Lily said, after laughing appreciatively, "but you'd have to get your kit off, and we're in public..." She shrugged. "Though in general I think the French are a lot cooler with that kind of thing. Lots of nude beaches."

He grimaced. "This is why everyone hates the French."

"In two days, we'll be back in England and you'll never have to set foot in France again," she pointed out, dabbing at the canvas in random spots, "and more importantly, all of this will be over. Mostly."

They still had to air the bloody thing, which seemed like an unavoidable nuisance. Lily could just about handle being recognized by random strangers who would actually think she'd signed up to the show on purpose, but she'd be damned if she voluntarily sat down to watch a second of it.

James swiped a curved line of yellow paint across his canvas, which despite being one line still looked more artistic than Lily's casual blob. "Obviously this was all worth it because I met you," he said, "but I am honestly considering throwing a parade of one when this is over. Of two, if you
"I have a flat that's very good for two person parading, if you ever fancied popping by. It'll be even better when I live with Beatrice—or worse, depending on how smug she's planning on being." She let her own brush hang loose by her side, now more absorbed in watching what he was doing. "She knew I fancied you before I bloody did. Kept insisting on it."

"She kept insisting about my feelings, too, while I kept insisting—well." He shot her a sideways look. "That I knew how I felt."

"You did know," Lily said, "then you didn't, and then you did again. It happens all the time, it's just that the consequences this time around are...heightened. By this stupid show, which is a singular form of torture, and doesn't suit you at all because you're honest and loyal and you don't like to hurt people."

His next swipe of the paintbrush was fast and harsh. "No," he said. "I don’t like to hurt them. And I really, really don’t like being made to hurt them."

James sounded so distressed that Lily was reminded of the time she'd gone to give him fries and found him desperate to escape Helena's clutches, except Lily couldn't sweep the show aside with a smart comment like she had with that lunatic. There were cameras and contracts and all sorts of caveats in place to keep them both compliant, and much as her every instinct was calling upon her to knock Rita into the lake and wrap James up in her arms, she would just have to wait before she could enact her own form of revenge.

"I know," she sighed, "and so does—honestly, so does anyone who's gotten to know you over the past few weeks. It's going to be pretty obvious tomorrow that none of this was by your design—which doesn't help you much, I know, but I still need you to know that."

"It doesn’t matter what I meant to happen. Not if the person is still hurt."

"I think that person is secretly pretty tough, you know. They might already know. They might end up surprising you." She paused. "That, or Jack and Ruby have got a lot of footage to steal and erase from the sea witch before the winter. I'm sure there's a computer hacking tutorial on YouTube—can't take more than an afternoon."

He gave a single laugh, one just slightly tinged with desperation, and added a few dark lines of paint to his canvas. "Thanks," he said. "It’s nice...it’s nice knowing I’ve got someone looking out for me. Even if it means they shout at me on random and unwanted fishing expeditions."

Lily turned back to her own painting, which looked like something a four-year-old would have considered beneath their level of skill.

"Yeah, well," she sighed, "I have been informed on more than one occasion that I can be quite pushy, but I guess it comes in handy sometimes."

"Yeah, you’re pushy, but I l—l-word that about you." He added, "Not lesbian."

"You're so extra, Potter. The word 'like' is right there at your disposal, but you shoot straight to 'lesbian.'"

"I said not lesbian."

"I promise, I was never at risk of assuming that was what you meant." She edged a little closer to him on her stool. "What are you painting?"
His waving lines formed something abstract, something that almost looked like something specific, but not quite, swirls of yellow and bright green above a writhing, dark grey mass.

"Can’t you tell?" His lips twitched. "Here." He added two narrow, rounded rectangles on top of the green, then added a bit of flair to a couple corners, making them into a familiar shape… But where had she seen that before...

His eyes flicked ever-so-quickly over toward the cameras.

Lily burst out laughing, and wondered if Rita's ego was just inflated enough that she'd enjoy being immortalized on canvas as a conniving sea witch, simply because she was the subject.

"I always thought I'd make a good Ariel," Lily said, "though I'd much rather be a Meg, and you should definitely give that to your mother to hang on her wall." She tapped the edge of his canvas with the end of her paintbrush. "It's really good."

"I was actually thinking we could burn it at the end of our parade." He gave a sly grin. "Does that work for you?"

"On a molecular level I'm very, very averse to destroying anything you've created, but I think I can make an exception."

"Since you're the exception to the horror of this show," James said, nudging his foot against hers, a subtle touch well short of the kiss Lily was dying to give him, "that seems pretty fitting to me."

God, he was stupidly bloody cute.

Not to mention very good at painting, executing dramatic parkour moves whilst pretending to be a secret agent, making Lily laugh and turning her to mush at the most inopportune moments.

This whole debacle had put Lily through the ringer in more ways than one, caused her an undue amount of stress, and taught her that it was possible to truly loathe another human being. All the same, Lily couldn't bring herself to regret her time on the show, nor could she pretend that it was her article—or Rufus, or any of the many problems he could have caused for her career if she'd disobeyed his instructions—that had really kept her in it for so long, in the end.

James Potter had been well and truly worth it, she thought, as she nudged his foot in return and he sent her a grin that made her heart erupt in a flurry of butterflies. Worth every ridiculous minute.

James’s last date with Lily reminded him why, exactly, he was selling his soul to the sea witch and keeping secrets from Isabella.

Lily matched him in every way that he needed—and that Isabella, quite frankly, didn’t. For Lily, he would endure the guilt and shame of leading Isabella on.

Obligation was a funny thing.

He’d only come on this show for his mum in the first place. He’d stuck around for Isabella and, well, contractual reasons. But now his loyalty hung on a woman he’d met just a few short weeks ago, and wasn’t that just the sort of self-affirmation his mum didn’t need.

He awoke the next morning to an obnoxious, rapid beating on his hotel door. This particular knock had happened on plenty of his childhood mornings, so he took his time before rolling out of bed, throwing on a hotel robe, and opening the door with the chain still attached.
"It’s the finale today!" Euphemia told him both unnecessarily and before he could say anything.

"In the promos leading up to this episode, tell Rita she can use that one of them...will...die...line because it’s true. I will kill you for waking me up this early."

She held up a hand with her fingers splayed out and considered it. "I’ve been thinking about diamond cuts for Lily," she said, "and I really think pear shaped is the way to go on this one. Her fingers are much too short for a round or heart cut—"

James, not for the first time in his life, slammed the door in his mother’s face.

It was immensely satisfying.

He further delayed the inevitable by taking a long shower and spending twice as long on his hair as usual. At least the ring shopping would provide some level of satisfaction, even if not the kind he’d told his mum about. The final rose ceremony, on the other hand...well. If he never left his room, it would never happen. That was just sound logic.

Eventually his mum and Rita coaxed him out of his room and into a car with a cup of tea and a Danish. It would have been a no-go if it had been a croissant, but his mum, and possibly Rita, knew better than to tempt him with that French garbage.

Tragically, James’s firm disinterest in his mum’s ring thoughts did not stop her from supplying them at length. By the time they arrived at some ritzy stretch of Paris, James wondered whether he could break free from the cameras long enough to purchase a pair of ear plugs.

Likely not.

It became even less likely when he saw who was waiting for them outside the jeweler’s.

"Ta-da!" cried Beatrice, with accompanying jazz hands. "It's me, your friendly neighborhood matchmaker!"

"Right," James said, turning around. "I’m getting back in the car."

Euphemia grasped his arm firmly and spun him back toward Beatrice. "Bea, darling, it’s so lovely to see you again. I’m thrilled you could join us to provide us with your expert opinion on rings. You know the two remaining contestants well, after all. We trust your judgment."

"Isn’t it a bit obvious that I’m picking Lily if you’re here?" James asked Bea.

"It’ll be obvious to anyone with a brain that you and Lily belong together," Beatrice countered, with a respectful nod to Euphemia. "And it's not my fault that Bonnie wasn't free."

"Have you heard anything about her?" Euphemia asked, face alight at the hint of new gossip.

Beatrice shrugged. "We were texting and she said she's got a lot of class prep to do for September."

James frowned. "Mum, didn’t you say Bonnie wanted to spend some time on her own in France?"

"I did," Euphemia said. "That’s exactly what I heard, and I am most intrigued that she told you something differently, Beatrice."

"Isn't France the best place to do class prep if you teach French?" said Beatrice. "Doesn't seem that mysterious to me."
"Oh," Euphemia said flatly. "Oh, that does make a bit of sense, doesn’t it? What a disappointment."

"You know what isn’t disappointing? Your son’s impending engagement." Beatrice fixed James with a smug smile. "I’m so proud of you for making a choice, even though I have no particular interest in it, as I’ve been completely impartial from the beginning."

James choked back a laugh. "Yes," he coughed. "Impartial. Definitely the word anyone who has been on set would use to describe you. Right after subtle, bashful, and discreet."

Beatrice cocked an eyebrow, and fixed him with a knowing look. "Discreet. That reminds me: how was the fantasy suite? I’d have asked Lily if I only had a way to keep in touch with her."

James felt his face heating. He’d completely forgotten about Lily’s mobile phone, and the fact that his glorious night with Lily may now have been shared with people beyond its two participants. "Oh. Right. Er. I try to be a, ah, gentleman, you know, and not share...details...with other people...." He cleared his throat. "Is, ah, Lily that sort of person, you think?"

"She’s more the type to drop vague and abstract hints, which is deeply frustrating for me because I love details. How else are you supposed to enjoy a good gossip?" she said, looking at Euphemia. "You understand that, don’t you?"

"That’s better than James!" Euphemia huffed. "He won’t so much as share an inkling of his romp with Lily. It’s good to know that she’s the person to pressure for information."

"Right," James said loudly. "We’re here for a ring, yeah? So I can, ah, woo my fiancée, or...whatever."

"Yes. The ring. Let’s get to that posthaste," said Beatrice, and started forwards, slipping her arm through the crook of James's elbow. "I’ve got a strange feeling that I know exactly the kind of thing you're looking for."

"Oh thank God," he blurted. He wouldn’t have to fight both women on his choice of ring, not if Lily had shared certain details of that night in the suite. "I mean, er, I value your expertise. As a, er, singer? Who knows a lot about jewelry. And also Lily and Isabella, obviously. You do have some ring expertise, right?"

"I’ve been proposed to more than once," said Beatrice breezily. "So, yeah, obviously."

The cameras followed them into the shop, where they were met by more of the crew, all set up for filming. Rita had told them very little of their dialogue would actually be included in the episode—they’d mostly use voiceovers he'd record later—but that they should still be careful to make it seem like Isabella and Lily had an equal shot at winning.

Euphemia fell over herself praising the jeweler, some woman James had never heard of but was apparently quite well-known, while James subtly tried to see if there were any price tags in sight. Tragically, this place was too posh for that sort of thing. He’d have to rely on Bea to help him find what he was looking for.

The jeweler brought out a selection of rings on a velvet-lined tray. James’s novice assessment skills informed him that some were gold, while others were silver. He further noticed that they were all very sparkly.

"Er, right," he said, hand hovering over one end of the rings. "Um. How sparkly does she—er. That is. How sparkly do you think Isabella and Lily like their rings?" he asked Bea.
"Sparkle isn't what matters when you're buying a ring for a woman you love deeply and intend to spend the rest of your life with," said Beatrice wisely. "What matters is that it suits the woman in question. Some women like big, showy diamonds. Some prefer to keep it simple."

"Absolutely," said Euphemia, twirling her own ring around her finger. "It must carry a great deal of meaning."

"So with that in mind," Bea continued, "what about that one?"

She pointed to a gaudy gold monstrosity in the center of the display, which was so heavily encrusted that it was difficult to see where the diamonds let off and the actual ring began.

James knew next to nothing about engagement rings, but he knew at once that Lily—who wore flats to the cocktail parties and had confessed in the suite that she'd hated being forced to put so much effort into her appearance for the show—would have despised it.

"I think this ring just oozes the sophistication of a well-traveled woman," said Bea, and nudged James with her elbow. "Don't you?"

"Oh yes," he said, sounding too fake even to himself. "It’s got...it’s got a lot of elegance." He quirked his eyebrows up at Bea in a question.

"So much elegance," Bea enthused. "I'm sure she'll be transported when she sees it. Whoever you pick. There's no possible way of telling."

"That?" Euphemia blanched. "Surely you’re both...starting at one end of things. To consider all your options, of course. Before moving on to a subtler touch."

"I really defer to Bea’s expertise," James said. "I know nothing of rings. Except the One Ring, which is not relevant here."

"I mean, ideally James wouldn't need to propose on national television, and I'd be helping him look for rings a few years from now when it made more sense and we had more options, but needs must," said Beatrice. "Besides, I'm sure Rita would appreciate it if we made a prompt decision."

Rita’s eyebrows had narrowed slightly, as though she smelled a plot afoot.

"I should pick two rings," James said. "One for each woman I might propose to. They have different tastes, after all. And, ah, well. Bea, d’you think this gold one might be a bit...I dunno...obvious?"

"Yes. Obvious. That was the word. Two rings is a good idea—genius, really. Lily told me you were smart and I now see she was right." Beatrice pointed at another ring, which had a thinner, silver band and a subtle, pretty red stone in the middle. "Something like that might be nice, if we're just spitballing."

"You didn’t think I was smart before?" he demanded.

"Hush, James," said Euphemia. "Let the woman speak some sense."

"She’s just insulted your son and you’re going to stand for it?"

As though she hadn’t heard him, Euphemia continued, "What drew you to that ring, Beatrice, sweet?"
"It's very pretty," Bea began, "but simple, which is classier, y'know? Indicates to me that the wearer isn't interested in superficial things. Also, the stone is clearly a garnet which, y'know, is good because it's so difficult to find a diamond that isn't unethically sourced and some women might have a problem with that." She held up a finger. "Did you know that garnets are the birthstone for January? Not that it matters, but who doesn't appreciate a good geology fact?"

"And yet it’s still very sparkly," James said sagely.

"Sparkly ring, sparkly woman," said Bea. "Seems fitting to me."

He had to make a show of admiring all the rings, mostly to throw Rita off the scent. When she announced they had enough footage, James jotted down the ring he wanted on a slip of paper, cupping his hand around the paper to keep anyone from seeing it. The jeweler would size it for Lily—there was no need to write that down—and place it in a box to remain hidden until James revealed it to the camera and, incidentally, Lily.

"Are you coming to the proposal, too?" he asked Bea outside the shop.

She winked. "It was my requirement for agreeing to the very cumbersome and exhausting task of helping you select a ring."

Euphemia hugged Bea with one arm. "You are, as always, an utter dear. I’ll be glad to have suitable company watching the proposal with me."

"Don’t tell Remus that," James muttered. Then he narrowed his eyes at Bea. "That’s why you came to France at all, isn’t it? To meet with your—your—paramour."

"Of course not," she said airily. "I simply have an extensive beret collection and needed an opportunity to don them."

"Useless hats," he grumbled. "They don’t even keep you warm."

"You hate all hats," said Euphemia.

"Yeah. But at least I get why other hats exist. Even if they’re insanitary."

"Shut it and get in the car," Rita said. "My beret threat still stands."

He made a face at her but got in the car anyway. He wouldn’t put it past her to glue one to his head for the final proposal.

After a quick swing by the hotel to collect Remus and Sirius, the show packed up and moved to the final location. His mum spent the drive nattering on about how James had to propose to Lily, and what he had to say, and what he definitely should not say—"don’t you dare mention Isabella—you can tell Lily what happens later—this is the most important moment of your life"—to the point that Sirius came very close to telling her to shut up.

Close, but never direct. Not with Euphemia.

Mercifully the car stopped after less than an hour’s drive. As usual, no one bothered to tell him anything about what was happening or where they were going. Everyone climbed out of the car next to a wide, squat building with complicated decorations and an unnecessary amount of columns. It was probably another stupid French museum filled with boring French art. The Dutch Impressionists were where it was at—everyone knew that.
The security guards eyed their group distastefully as they slipped into a side entrance of the building. As expected, the interior decor went for gilded and gaudy over anything resembling actual taste. Rita pointed Sirius, Remus, and Euphemia toward another corridor, and led James to a tacky bedroom with busy wallpaper and antique furniture.

"Your tux is behind the dressing screen," Rita said, eyes on her clipboard. "Quickly, Potter. We’re behind schedule."

"That’s hardly my fault. Sirius was the one who insisted on fixing his hair."

"And yet you’re the one paying the price," she said idly.

If the indignity of having to strip to his pants in a room with Rita weren’t enough, he had to endure her instructions even while he suited up.

"You have to make it seem like you might propose to Isabella." She handed a piece of paper over the screen. "We took the liberty of drafting you a speech. Memorize it."

James picked it up, skimmed the first line, and pulled a face.

"Sure," he said. "I’m definitely reading this."

"I know that you’re lying, but you are, in fact, saying this. Or something similar at worst."

"Or?"

"Or you’re going to break her bloody heart, that’s what."

"You shock me with your sudden regard for our feelings."

"You didn’t ask for my motivations. That’s yours."

"And yours is?"

He could practically hear her smirk. "Better television, obviously."

James shook his head and shoved the speech in his pocket. He hadn’t exactly thought of his own smooth words for this situation, but he’d be damned if he let Rita dictate the terms of him finally telling Isabella how he felt.

Once he'd dressed, Rita, Remus, and Euphemia led him out onto the grounds. His mum cooed over his tux, which despite making him feel about five also made him feel like he’d look nice for Lily. And for letting Isabella down. He grimaced.

"It will all work out," Remus told him as they walked through lines of small, potted trees. "Just be honest with Isabella about how you feel. She’ll understand."

"You’re awfully confident considering you don’t know her very well."

Remus hummed. "It’s true, I’m certainly not her confidant. All the same, I have...shall we say some intuition."

Rita’s eyes snapped to Remus from her clipboard. "What are you saying, Lupin?"

"Oh, I’m simply speculating. Am I not permitted to bolster my friend’s mood prior to the final rose
ceremony?"

They stopped by a small, circular pool next to the joining of two building wings. The sun hung near the horizon, gilding the groomed trees and cream-colored building. The trees seemed like a normal part of the gardens, but the flower-laden trellis, and the many, many, many cameras facing it from across the pond, were certainly not.

Nor was the random pedestal holding up a solitary red rose, the mere sight of which sent James’s pulse racing.

"We’ll be filming from a slight distance," Euphemia explained, "to make your discussions feel more intimate."

"But they’re still going to be recorded," James said.

"Of course. But it will seem more natural to you."

"But I’m in France."

"Yes, but would you rather the cameras stand two feet from you as you shatter Isabella’s heart?"

Remus coughed.

"That is," Euphemia said, "as you delicately let Isabella down?"

James briefly pressed his palm to his forehead. "Cheers, Mum. Thanks for all your faith."

She kissed his cheek. "My faith is overflowing. So long as you land Lily, of course, and it does seem like a done deal, doesn’t it?"

"Well, yeah—unless you know something I don’t—"

"That’s enough pep talking, I believe," said Remus. "Euphemia, may I escort you to the other side of the pond?"

She took his arm and told James, "Good luck, dear. We love you no matter what."

"No matter what what?" he called after them as they walked away.

"Remember," Rita said. "I’m watching."

James waved a hand to dismiss her. "Yeah, obviously. You’re a shoe-in for most dedicated peeping Tom at the BAFTAs. Congratulations."

She raised her eyebrows at James over her rhinestone glasses in a last warning and spun away, already barking orders at the camera crew.

James tugged at the bottom of his jacket, stretching his neck side to side to loosen the tight collar of his shirt. His hands slid over the fabric, his palms drenched with sweat. Hopefully the light didn’t catch on his sweat trails. If it did, maybe they could special-effect it out or something.

Surely no one would blame him for being nervous here, right?

After some quick camera and sound checks, Rita shouted for the crew to bring out "the first one."

James kept shifting his weight between his feet, compulsively wiping his hands on his trousers and
keeping a keen eye out for Isabella between the trees.

It turned out to be easy to spot them. Bozo was wheeling his camera backwards to film Remus and Isabella from the front as they strolled through the trees.

They’d be capturing the footage of him right now, too, and splice it in with some stupid voiceovers and shots of Isabella’s entrance.

Then she was in sight, on the gravel path leading up to James and the trellis and the pedestal, to the place where he was about to turn her down in front of a national audience while they wore formalwear that cost as much as the engagement rings he’d been shown.

He took a deep breath. There’d be some repercussions from this—largely self-imposed guilt, possibly shouting and crying from Isabella—but at least the deed was nearly done.

Remus stopped them about twenty feet from James, said something quietly to Isabella, and unlinked his arm from hers. She sent him a small smile and, after a moment, looked at James.

They’d done her hair in some complicated updo that had lots of strands hanging down around her bare shoulders, and placed her in a satiny blue gown that trailed behind her as she walked.

It would get so dirty from the dusty gravel. Typical, impractical Rita.

He tried to restrain a frown as Isabella approached. Not just because of the nerves bit, but also because up close she looked a bit peaky. He blamed French food, which he was pretty sure was scientifically not good for the health. The air was probably shit, too, from all their smokers. Luckily he’d get to leave this hellhole soon.

And then, finally, she was standing in front of him. Although she held back just a bit, he stepped forward to wrap her in a tight hug, a pre-apology of sorts.

"Hi," he said into her neck. He pulled back and smiled weakly. "You look amazing."

"So do you," she said.

For so long he’d felt like he could read her, but her expression was as illegible as Arabic to him at the moment. She was smiling...sort of. Her tongue slipped out the tiniest bit to swipe along her bottom lip as she looked up at him.

Regardless of whatever she was feeling, he had to say the same thing.

"Right," he said. "Ah. I think I’m supposed to go first..." He picked up one of her hands—as sweaty as his. Not that he faulted her for this. "Er. So. You, Isabella, you’re—you are the sweetest person. I can’t tell you how much I—I mean. I can. I came onto this show expecting to be miserable from the first minute. And I was, in a lot of ways. This wasn’t—I didn’t think I’d find anyone decent on this show. Definitely no one I wanted to spend time with. And then you walked out of that limo, and I—I felt like I knew you. Straight off, I felt comfortable around you."

Her lips had started to press together, thinning out more and more.

He cleared his throat. "I never wanted to lie to you on this show. I didn’t think it would ever really come up, honestly, because we were so...in sync. Because you’re genuine and soft-hearted, and I really can’t say how much I appreciate that—more people could stand to work on those things. So I absolutely want to make sure that you stay in my life—"
"No," she blurted.

James blinked.

He looked down at their hands.

He looked back up at her stricken face.

"Ah, sorry?" he managed.

"I can’t do this." She took a step back, yanking her hand out of his grasp. "I can’t marry you, James."

"Er—"

Words kept tumbling out of her mouth. "I don’t love you," she said, clutching her hand to her chest. "I don’t. I wish I did because you’re so lovely but I—I don’t love you."

James’s head pulled back. "What?"

"I meant to tell you earlier but I—I was afraid. I’ve never—I’ve never been good at saying what I want—I didn’t want to play paintball or do that romance photo shoot or let you push Lily in the lake but I went along with all of it, and I shouldn't have. I'm always letting other people walk all over me—"

"Isabella, please, you don’t under—"

"I’m not done!" she said, her voice pitching higher. "Because there’s someone—someone I met on this show who keeps reminding me that I can stand up for myself, and that I’m allowed to say what I want, and—"

James’s eyes immediately landed on Peter’s form behind one of the cameras. "I swear to God, if my friends are three for three on this show—"

Isabella turned to face the cameras across the pond. "I love you, Bonnie Grogan!"

"What?"

She glanced at James, eyebrows drawn together in apology. "We kissed the night we came back from my parents’ house. I didn’t mean to, I swear, it just—it just happened, and it felt..." She looked back at the camera and took a breath. "Bonnie, I should have told you every time we talked. I should have told you that night—I should have quit the show with you and run off to Nice because—because I’m bi! I’m bi, Mum and Dad, and I’m not sorry, I love Bonnie Grogan!"

For the first time in more than a decade, James’s brain had tuned to a channel of static, all words and any trains of thought absent from his mind.

There was just Isabella, lovely Isabella, standing in front of him and breathing heavily, her face flushed, talking to Bonnie in the future when this aired.

Because Isabella was in love with Bonnie.

Isabella was in love with Bonnie Grogan.

Somehow. Which was really bloody weird.
And good, actually, now that he thought about it. Really really good.

Because Isabella wasn’t heartbroken over him.

She’d be fine!

She wouldn’t care (probably mostly) at all about James picking Lily.

"Isabella," he found himself saying at last.

She spun toward him, grabbing his hand. "I’m so, so sorry, James, I never meant to hurt—"

"No, no, you don’t—" He placed his other hand on top of hers. "It’s fine. I swear. I wasn’t even going to—er. That is. You’re...the first girl out."

It took a second for understanding to pass over Isabella’s face. "Oh," she said. "Oh, you weren’t—"

"No, I, you see—Lily, she’s—it’s not that I don’t like you, it’s only…"

"Oh no," Isabella cried, wrenching her hands free. "I’ve made a complete fool of myself as usual—"

"No, you haven’t—that was so moving, and, er, I wish you and Bonnie all the best." He smiled. "Really. No hard feelings at all. I mean, at least not from me—you’ve every right to be pissed at me, I wasn’t allowed to tell you I’d changed my mind and I was feeling sick about it—"

"No, no, I’m fine! I felt so awful, too, and really neither of us—" Her hand flew up to cover her mouth, muffling a noise.

"Was that a laugh?" James asked.

She kept her hand up as she said, "No?"

They looked at each other, both well-dressed enough for a royal event, both in love with someone else, and both enjoying a cool, beautiful wash of relief…

James laughed, too.

Just once at first.

Then again, which set Isabella off, and then they were clutching at each other, trying to stay upright through their fit.

They had both been wanting to break up. They had both fallen in love with others and hadn’t known how to tell the other and had most definitely not wanted to do it on camera in front of a national audience and, shortly after, the entire internet.

When they’d calmed down, laughter gone and only a lingering chest ache remaining, James pulled Isabella into a tight hug.

"Go find Bonnie," he said. "Bea’s over by my mum, and she has Bonnie’s number."

Isabella nodded, her arms still clinging to him. "I can’t believe this worked out," she said.

"Yeah," he said, grinning broadly. "I really can’t believe it either."
She pecked his cheek, all chaste and friendship, and hurried offset as quickly as heels on gravel could move. Which was not very, but who cared? They were both going to be happy.

As Isabella approached the camera area, Bea came rushing forward to sweep her up into a gigantic hug, both girls squealing with joy.

Because right—it wasn’t just James and Lily and Isabella and Bonnie who’d been brought together by this show. Remus had finally found a good match himself. Charlene wouldn’t stick around, knowing Sirius, but he’d had a good time as well.

It was all over now.

Or at least, very nearly over.

He just had to propose to his girlfriend of basically two days in front of an eventually-national audience.

No big deal.

And knowing Rita’s penchant for keeping him on edge, Lily would be showing up any minute.

He turned his attention to where Isabella had originally entered, his heartbeat thrumming along in his chest, an irrepressible smile on his face despite his nerves.

It was showtime.

Lily’s posh, French dress was all elegance and class. Though she privately believed that any formal gowns donned for filming should have erred on the wrong side of tacky—a style truly befitting a reality show—she insisted on wearing Euphemia’s gift again for the finale anyway.

She wanted to look nice for James, and besides, it was so bloody expensive that she felt she’d have to wear it as much as she could in order to justify the purchase.

What a sight she’d make, twirling through her local Tesco’s cereal aisle in a cloud of floaty scarlet chiffon.

Perhaps she’d quit her job in it.

As it turned out, Lily had plenty of time that afternoon to muse on the many adventures which might await her dress, as she sat in a tent near the Palace of Versailles and waited, and waited, and waited, for what seemed like hours, until eventually, a couple of crew members hurried inside to take their positions for filming.

Minutes later, Sirius strode in to escort her to what would happily be her last event in a short but illustrious career as an undercover circus performer, and a camera turned on Lily as she was ushered to her feet.

"Hello, Lily," said Sirius, very formally.

She tried not to let her lips twitch. "Hello, Sirius."

"I shall now escort you to the bachelor, and the final rose ceremony," he continued, his usual shit-eating grin nowhere to be seen, sounding eerily unlike the snarky, dark-humored Sirius she had come to know off camera. "Are you nervous?"
"No," she lied, nerves jittering about in her stomach, "just ready to get this nightmare over with."

She’d already been shepherded into her longest and most excruciating confessional at an ungodly hour that morning. Rita had poked, prodded, and even begged for some insight into Lily’s innermost thoughts, and the little Lily had given already felt like far too much candor for one day.

The sea witch was done getting what she wanted, Lily thought, as she linked arms with Sirius and he steered her out of the tent. She and James had a plan, and they were going to smash it, and Rita would be steaming at the ears.

They walked through the trees in silence, mindful of the cameras on their faces. As they came to the edge of the thicket to approach James—and yet another flowery trellis—Lily's nerves were temporarily abated, and her attention caught, by a tall, tanned woman in a lemon yellow dress, who was standing next to Euphemia and waving frantically at her.

"Bea?" she said, moving unconsciously towards her friend, even though Beatrice was standing on the other side of a pond. "What—"

Sirius's arm locked tightly around hers, pulling her back to his side with a slight jerk. "Easy there, Duchess."

"But Beatrice—"

"She's not going anywhere," he said, his lips barely moving. "Go and land my best mate first, yeah?"

Then he brought them to a halt about twenty feet away from where James was standing, and completely blindsided Lily by dropping a kiss on her forehead.

"Have fun," he said, before loping gracefully away.

She blinked at his retreating back before turning her gaze on James, who also appeared to have been staring at Sirius, but met her eyes at the exact same time.

Her heart leapt into her throat. Which was so silly—this proposal wasn't even real…

He was, though. They were. And he looked so handsome in his posh tux, even though Lily liked him so much better in jeans and a t-shirt, and best of all in absolutely nothing.

She walked the remaining distance toward him, holding onto her dress so her wispy skirt wouldn't trail in the gravel, and smiled when she drew up in front of him.

"You're all dressed up," she remarked, though her eyes were carefully searching his face for any inkling of pain or guilt following what must have been an unpleasant interlude with Isabella. "What's the occasion?"

If he was upset, he was doing a suspiciously good job of hiding it. Normally he paraded his emotions around like, well, the parade they were going to throw.

He smiled at her, all openness and honesty. "Found a euro on the ground."

"Must have been a very shiny euro. You're making that face you made when my mum said you were handsomer than all of my exes."

"Yes," he said knowingly. "It's an extremely sparkly euro, one might even say."
Lily imagined that this wasn't the heartfelt, lovelorn monologue that Rita and Euphemia certainly would have wanted James to launch into, and had to suppress a laugh at the thought of how frustrated they were bound to be at that moment.

"Sparkly's good. I like sparkly." She swept a hand along her dress. "Sorry about my own disheveled appearance. Haven't done laundry in a while."

He angled his head just an inch, assessing her figure. "Nothing forces you to rummage for the absolute garbage in your wardrobe like not having done laundry. But don't worry, I won't tell anyone."

Euphemia let out such sharp, loud, and dramatic cry of dismay that Lily had to press her lips to contain her laughter.

"Right," she said, once the wave of mirth had passed, wondering why Rita hadn't tried to intervene yet. "I hear you have some sort of speech to give and I haven't got all day—lots of laundry to do—so, you know..." She gestured towards him. "Have at it, and try not to break my heart."

"As the lady wishes," He reached out and gently lifted both of her hands, clearing his throat dramatically. "Dearest Lily. Flower of my soul. Your heart is so precious to me that breaking it is the last thing on my mind. Well, second-to-last, right before the idea of ever moving to France."

Their entire plan hinged on their ability to deliver numerous absurdities with a straight face, and Lily was already struggling to keep the corners of her lips in check, even though it wasn't her turn to speak yet.

James gazed into her eyes, putting on a surprisingly decent show of sincerity. "I value your heart more than I value a bacon sandwich," he said, the corners of his lips twitching ever so faintly. "We've shared so many things these past several weeks: stories, cheese, and yes, kisses."

"Cheese-infused kisses, mostly," she agreed.

"No one who saw us on the first night we met—no one—would believe that you and I would be here at the final rose ceremony together. Our passion was not an immediate blaze, but instead a devastating inferno that grew out of a still-hot match dropped onto dry grass."

The people in sound-editing would definitely have a job on their hands removing the unattractive snort she couldn't repress in time.

"I think a lot of people would kill to have an immediate blaze," he said. "They want that fairy tale beginning, where you lock eyes and your heart lurches and everything is magical. But that sort of connection can fizzle out quickly, and no one wants a fizzle."

Lily felt a start—a stutter, really—in a place tucked tightly behind her ribcage. "Um..."

"I don't want a fizzle," James continued. "I want someone who brings me McDonald's fries. I want someone who loves my weird cat. I want someone who gives me a wicked cool spy nickname."

His mock-serious voice had dropped a key into his normal speaking register, and as her heart began to pound in earnest, Lily realized that James no longer appeared to be sticking to the plan.

He definitely wasn't sticking to the plan.

The plan was gone, abandoned, cast aside with his dismissal of those immediate blazes, which had
seemed like such a big deal when Lily had been laboring under the belief that she could never compare to what he had with Isabella, but meant nothing in the face of what she and James had grown to feel for each other.

He was looking at her in a way that made him seem shy, almost—tentative and unsure, as if he was waiting for her to weigh in on his derailment of their little scheme. His hands were still wrapped around hers, warm and comforting, but they were shaking a little, or maybe that was her.

"It’s okay," she said quietly. Her throat felt a little tight. "It’s okay. Keep going."

James coughed as his face grew a little flushed. "Er, right," he said plainly. "Only I forgot the rest of what I was going to say... But I guess the truth of it is, I never, ever, ever expected to find someone like you on this show. Someone who balances me and pushes me and who laughs at me no matter what. Sorry, I meant that to be parallel. The point is, you came out of literally nowhere—sorry, I can't say that, not literally, I'm just trying—I'm trying to say that I love you, Lily Evans. And I didn't see it coming, and you didn't see it coming, and that's—that's pretty fairy tale in its own right, I think."

Lily should have said something, should have had something clever or meaningful or hilarious up her sleeve, but she couldn’t really speak. A lump had lodged itself in her windpipe, and her blood felt as if it were stampeding through her veins, moving so fast that she was growing lightheaded.

She nodded, which wasn't much, but it seemed enough to prompt James to carry on.

"I want to travel the world with you and have a family with you and possibly adopt another cat with you, depending on how Algernon feels about it, of course."

It seemed to take an age for him to sink down to one knee. He withdrew a velvet-covered box from his front pocket and snapped it open to reveal the gaudiest, sparkliest golden ring she had ever seen.

"Lily Evans," he said, his eyes fixed utterly on hers. "Will you marry me?"

She barely registered the ring, giving it the barest of skimming glances before all of her focus returned to his handsome face.

The ring wasn’t what was important. Neither of them intended for her to keep it, and even if they had, nothing else mattered one whit in the face of the massive, startling announcement he’d just laid down at her feet.

"Do you mean that?" she asked him, squeezing the question past that pesky tightness in her throat. "Do you really love me?"

His hand faltered, dropping an inch. "Er," he said. "I mean, yeah, that’s not..." His eyes flicked down to the distasteful ring that was not remotely her style, but which would fetch a terrific sum when she later sold it. "That’s real."

"Real," she faintly repeated.

She looked up, tilting back her head to take in her surroundings. Her eyes moved past the pretty trellis, skated over the rose which sat atop a nearby platform, gazed across the pond to where Rita, Euphemia, and all the rest were waiting, and as she turned them back upon James it struck her just how terribly unreal this whole debacle had been.
Lily was standing in an elaborately pretty place she'd never thought to visit, garbed in an elaborately beautiful dress she'd never have chosen, staring down at an elaborately ugly ring she never would have wanted, and the only real thing within a hundred mile radius of the elaborate circus she was part of was the person on one knee in front of her.

"I love you too," she told him.

It was far too soon to say it and she was definitely crazy, but that didn't make it any less true.

He ducked his head, a grin growing on his face, and squeezed his eyes shut. "Wow," he said. "Wow, that's—I didn't think that'd hit me like that, but…wow."

"Well, get used to hearing it," Lily said, with as much of her usual snap as she could muster through the overwhelming swell of emotion she was feeling, "and promise to defend me from your mum later, because I'm about to make her very, very angry."

She lowered herself to her own knees, expensive gown be damned. Her skirt was so light and flimsy, she could feel the damp of the grass against her skin.

"Probably not very traditional," she remarked, "but you and I are on the same level and that's why this works, right? We make each other laugh, and you argue back when I give you shit and I love that, and you do these insanely selfless things for the people you care about just to make them happy, even if it means you're not, which makes me want to shake you and tell you that you need to think about yourself more, but that's fine, right? Because you've got me and I love you, so I'll think about you."

He laughed, wild and giddy and free, and shook his hands slightly in place.

"I really want to focus on the part where you also love me," he said, "but also my arm is cramping from holding out this box, so please just say yes already so I can put this down and kiss you."

"Oh, well if your arm is cramping…" She beamed at him, a laugh bubbling up from the center of her chest. "Yes, James Potter, I will marry you."

For a second, his smile broadened. Then in one swift movement, he set the box on the ground, pushed forward off his bent knee, and reached forward to slide a hand alongside her face as he kissed her. Lily could hear delighted exclamations in the background, but she ignored them, smiling against his lips as they washed meaninglessly over her head.

Her smile grew even brighter when she eventually pulled away.

"Go on then, Jack," she grandly instructed, and held out her left hand. "Do the thing properly."

And even though this part wasn’t real—even though they’d agreed that he’d propose with an expensive ring that she could sell to finance her travels, and that his proposal was in no way a legitimate request to spend the rest of their lives together because hello they’d only just met—her stomach was doing all sorts of gymnastics as he lifted the ring from the box and slid it delicately onto her finger.

He kissed her, this time on the cheek, and offered her one of his hands. "Well," he said. "I think—that’s all settled then, Ruby. We’re in love. We’re engaged. And now, finally, we can get the hell out of France."

"Ideally before the sea witch decides to end this series with an impromptu wedding," said Lily, allowing James to pull her to her feet. "But before we return to London and I introduce you to the
inside of my wonderfully private bedroom, I believe I'm missing a rose?"

"Oh, er, right." He looked around, as though he’d already forgotten where it was, and then picked it up from the pedestal. "I wish Algernon had been here for this. He could have brought it to you."

On the other side of the pond, Rita had begun to make her way towards them, closely followed by Euphemia and Beatrice, which gave Lily the strongest urge to find the next Eurostar heading back to London and escape, Jack and Ruby style, before either of them could be forced into any further degradation.

She'd suggest it to him later, after whatever confessionals or final shots Rita would insist upon, and they could hightail it off together, just the two of them.

That was how it would be from now on: just the two of them.

Plus Algernon, of course, who would definitely be pleased to learn that Lily was sticking around.

"We can name him grand marshal of the parade to make it up to him," she said, and held out her hand for the rose. "We'll get him a bow tie, but not a hat. I've heard they're insanitary."

He handed her the rose and crooked out an arm for her to loop hers through. "Oh, Ruby," he said. "You truly get me. Please join me in a celebratory trip to McDonald’s." He nodded at the horse-drawn carriage pulling up along the path.

"I'd love to," she agreed, and linked her arm with his. "Only this time you can buy the fries."

Chapter End Notes

Brownie points to everyone who asked about Bonnabella. You were right for reading into that! Sorry for ignoring your asks and comments on this - we didn't want to spoil you. ;)
James squeezed his gloved hand around Lily’s in the back seat of the taxi, an illicit thrill running through him as he did so.

Six months, they’d been hiding things.

Six long. Fucking. Months.

It actually hadn’t been that bad at first, since no one knew who they were and therefore no paparazzi or members of the public had any interest in them. They’d been a little more lax: some dinners out in remote parts of the city, covert nights at James’s flat, and walks in very populated parks.

Then the show had started promos and everything had been on lock down.

But now—now—things were finally, mercifully over.

Who gave a shit if anyone saw them together now? The finale would air in a couple hours, and then everyone would know how it turned out.

If they hadn’t already guessed, of course.

James had no clue what people were saying. He adamantly did not watch any of the episodes or Google anything related to the show. Whenever it aired, Lily holed up with James in his room, while Sirius fast-forwarded through episodes in the living room to watch his own bits.

If anyone ever asked him about the show, he straight-up walked away without a word, regardless of whether it was his boss or his barista asking (the latter hurt more—James loved his seasonal peppermint mocha and hated walking out empty-handed). If people shouted random things at him on the street, he ignored them. If people bothered him on the Tube—well. They didn’t anymore because he took taxis instead to get privacy.

Or at least, privacy most of the time.

One time his driver had asked about the show, and James had rolled out of the car while it was still moving.

He’d had to go to the hospital to have them bandage him up, but it was totally worth it on principle.

Ruby had said she hadn’t been impressed. But Jack had a suspicion she was only trying to deter him from future escape efforts.

As best James could tell without ever having watched the show, Rita’s threats before his "proposal" hadn’t been fully acted on. Thus far no strangers had dumped tea over his head in protest of any of his decisions, or anything. Really it was a lot of shouting and unsubtle picture-taking from strangers. And he could live with that.

Because it was all over tonight!

And he had Lily. Wonderful, gorgeous Lily who’d agreed to throw caution into the wind, the
sewer, and wherever else they could cram it. Maybe a garbage disposal.

It didn’t matter. What mattered was tonight James could proudly show that he’d wised up in the end and chosen the right woman for him.

And she’d chosen him back. Because, although several contestants and many viewers liked to forget about it, consent was extremely important.

The car stopped in front of the Potters’ house in Belgravia. James paid the man and grinned at Lily.

"I hope you’re prepared for my mum to have acquired an army’s worth of baked goods to celebrate the finale. There might only be four of us tonight, but she will expect to have absolutely no leftovers by the time we leave. Unless we escape through the back patio, of course."

"Knowing your mum, she’d have had chains fitted on the patio doors after our last escape," said Lily as she let go of his hand. She opened the door on her side of the car. "Not that I've changed my stance on our abseiling off the roof, mind. It's still a very firm no."

It was Euphemia’s fault that Lily’s enthusiasm for dangerous secret agent maneuvers had been dampened in recent weeks. The injuries James had sustained following his dramatic taxi exit had been greatly exaggerated by an overzealous Euphemia over the phone, which upset Lily so much that she’d turned up at the hospital in a blind panic.

That really hadn't helped with the whole "keeping their relationship secret" thing. A couple of nurses had the show’s ending spoiled for them, but that paled in comparison to the sight of his beloved in tears.

James was convinced that Euphemia had overstated his condition on purpose. She lived for the drama, and still hadn't forgiven either of them for revealing that they weren't really engaged.

"Fine," he muttered as they walked up to the door, their hands linked. "We’ll see if you change your tune once you’ve had your twentieth macaron."

"That’s what you think, but I’ve been practicing the art of stealthily hiding food in my handbag for days," said Lily dryly.

"This is why I love you," he said, fitting his key into the lock. He pushed open the door for Lily and frowned. "Huh," he said as she walked into a dark foyer. "And this is...suspicious."

"Very," Lily agreed, stepping aside to let James follow her into the foyer. She started to unbutton her coat, the thoughtful crease between her brows only visible by the light from the street lamp outside. "Unless there’s a power cut—but the other houses would be out. This is absolutely a plot."

The living room lights to the left flicked on as more than a dozen people jumped up from behind furniture, shouting, "Surprise!"

"Figures," Lily murmured, sounding incredibly unsurprised.

"Oh hell no," said James, and spun around to head out the door.

"Dear," said Euphemia, rushing in from the living room. "Where are you going?"

"You just want to make us watch the finale," James accused.
"Well, you always wanted a surprise party."

"Not like this!"

Euphemia settled a hand on his wrist, tight as a handcuff, while her other prised the door from his hand so she could shut it. "The surprised person does not get to set the terms of the surprise party, James. That’s science."

"She's right, you know," said Beatrice, who had stuck her head out of the living room door. Remus waved one hand at them from behind her.

"Go back inside," Lily scolded. "You're in a world of trouble for keeping this to yourself."

Beatrice ducked into the living room, cackling like the conniving witch she was. As she disappeared, though, Algernon emerged from the party, making a beeline for James and Lily. He wound his way around their legs, rubbing his coat against them, before settling on the ground between them.

Lily picked up Algernon in her arms and leveled a flat look at Euphemia. "Surprise parties are generally supposed to be a treat for the guests of honor."

"This is a treat!" Euphemia trilled. "We've got a profiterole tower!"

"Profiterole towers are small fry."

"And not even McDonald’s fries," James added with a scowl.

Lily lifted an eyebrow at Euphemia. "You're clearly banking on us not wanting to look rude in front of your guests, so what'll you offer us if we agree to stay?"

Euphemia's grip on James's wrist did not slacken, but she also didn't waste any time arguing. "What did you have in mind?"

"Easy," said Lily at once. "You agree to stop asking James when he's going to propose for real, and we might reconsider our plans for the evening."

"Not worth it," said James. "Don’t doubt my commitment to avoiding the show."

"What if she stops asking about a proposal," Lily suggested, "and stops questioning us about our sex life, and stops having a go at you for liking Isabella first?"

"Please stay." Euphemia moved to take both of James's hands, but held them more delicately. "It’s the last thing I will ever ask of you."

"That’s not remotely true," he said, "but fine. If you meet all of Lily’s conditions, I’ll break my principles. But only because you’re my mum. And the second you break one of the conditions, I will jump out the window."

Euphemia beamed and swung their joined hands side to side. "Done. Now come, Grace and Isabella and Bonnie are all here, too."

"Glory be, my mother is here." Lily sent James a small smile as Algernon leaped from her hands to the floor. "One last nightmare for us to stick out, yeah?"

"One last local case for Jack and Ruby," James said, shaking his mum’s hands off him, "before they take their adventures global."
Lily's smile grew wider. "Come on then, Jack. Get your coat off and we'll crack this mother wide open."

James reluctantly handed his coat over to his mum to hang on the rack, waited for Lily to do the same, and headed into the party. Euphemia had filled the room with helium balloons, and a fancy banner that read Congrats On Figuring It Out, James, because that wasn’t creepy at all. She had set up a lovely buffet along the front windows, one he would be partaking of quickly and thoroughly.

But first they ran into Bonnie and Isabella, who, like James and Lily, seemed incapable of long-term hand separation.

They all broke apart long enough for a round of hugs before their paired hands found each other again.

Clearly James wasn’t the only one looking there, given Lily’s next comment.

"You’re engaged?" she said, a wide smile bursting across her face. "Oh my God!"

James had just enough time to catch a glimpse of gold on both ladies’ fingers before they began another round of frantic hugging, this time accompanied by some mild jumping up and down.

Not that James was complaining.

"That is brilliant," he said. He picked up Isabella’s hand to examine her ring—not because he cared, but because women cared about these things.

It was sparkly.

He told her so.

"Thanks," Isabella said, her face flushed with happiness as she took her hand back. "I knew she’d like an Old European cut, so I chose it for both of us." She sent an adoring, sidelong look to Bonnie. "I’m so glad I went on the show." She laughed and held up a finger before James could say anything. "I know, it was torture, but still. I think we’re all glad we went through Rita’s hell, aren’t we?"

"Eh," said James, nudging Lily. "I s’pose I picked up a new accessory that I quite like, but the food at the castle was crap, so."

"And I clearly picked up the world's most romantic boyfriend," Lily flatly intoned, nudging him back.

James grinned at her, and then turned it to Isabella and Bonnie. "Where are you two going to live?" James asked. "Joining us in civilization here in London?"

"Not Oxford," Bonnie said. "They punt wrong."

"They do not," Isabella said playfully. "It’s Cambridge that needs to get their heads around things."

"Also my dog hates Oxford," Bonnie told James and Lily. She angled her head slightly and winked, clearly trying to hide it from Isabella. "He likes the country, so we’re going to move somewhere near Slough, maybe."

Isabella nodded. "But my fitness center is going to be somewhere more urban. I’ve looked at a few
possible locations in Wembley, and Fleamont was so kind to look over my business plan.”

"Of course he did, the man's angelic," said Lily. "That's so exciting about your fitness center, Bells, I'm so proud of you."

"Thank you." Isabella lifted her chin slightly. "I'm proud of myself."

James had further burning questions but could not find the delicate words to approach them without sounding like an arse.

Luckily Lily shared his love of gossip. Also she was Isabella’s friend. But Lily did love getting the latest—she was a journalist, after all.

James had no excuse besides that he’d inherited it from his mum.

"And how's everything else going in Oxford?" Lily asked, with a sensitivity and tact that James could not have achieved with years of practice. "Any new developments?"

Bonnie gave a bracing squeeze to Isabella’s hand, which did not bode well.

Isabella put on a light voice—another bad sign. "Well," she began. "As you know, it was a shock to my parents, of course, how things all turned out. And they didn’t, erm…"

"They were pricks," Bonnie supplied.

"They—yes. They were," Isabella conceded. "But my brothers actually stood up for me—"

"Which is to say they didn’t cut off contact."

"—and after a few months, when I told them I’d proposed, my dad reached out."

"He’s coming to the wedding." Bonnie glanced at Isabella. "And if he’s a prick, my uncle Dean will toss him out. Literally—he’s a wrestler."

The most interesting thing about Bonnie and James had had no clue. Not really a shocker, considering they’d never been interested in each other, but still.

Isabella sent Bonnie a look of disapproval, but Bonnie just kissed her cheek and grinned.

Isabella shook her head. "You two are of course invited," she told Lily and James. "And Bea and Remus and most of the other girls."

"Not Helena, though," Bonnie quickly put in. "Can you believe she tried to crash the party earlier?"

"She did?" James’s eyes widened and he spun on his heel to scope out the room. He half-expected to see Helena leap out from beneath a table and tear the banner to shreds, but luckily all was calm. Not even the ruination of that cringeworthy banner would have been worth Helena’s presence.

Maybe Bonnie could ask her wrestler uncle to come and destroy it.

"I’m not remotely surprised," said Lily flatly, before James could ask Bonnie if her uncle lived nearby. "I ran into her outside James’s flat last week—"

James whipped back around. "You what?"

"Yeah, I had to scare her away."
"You never told me!"

"Because you were drunk on victory and peppermint schnapps, my love, and I didn’t want to kill the mood," said Lily softly, slipping her arm around his back. "Of course we’ll come to the wedding," she added, speaking to the girls. "We’d never miss it. Even if we’re out of the country, we’ll fly back in."

"We’re setting a date soon, so we’ll be sure to give you both plenty of notice," said Isabella.

"And you’ve got another five or six months before you leave, right?" Bonnie added.

"We’ve had to bring it forward a few months, actually," said Lily. "My job is basically a dream, and I saw an opportunity to tie my writing into travel—sort of like a diary where I document how I’m educating myself on a bunch of different issues through experience. I pitched it to my editor and she really liked it."

"Of course she did," said Bonnie. "That’s so cool!"

"It means I’ll be working a bit while we’re away, but otherwise it’ll just be me and this weirdo having adventures for a year," said Lily, smiling up at James.

"Life is rough," James said in a gravelly voice. In a perkier voice, he added, "But her Bachelor article comes out tomorrow and I, for one, look forward to seeing you both at Rita’s funeral next week."

James had bet Algernon fifty quid that Rita would have a stroke by the time she finished reading the article, which portrayed the show in all its hellacious detail. Well, all the detail aside from Sirius and Remus having sex with contestants on the show. That part did not need to be public information, James had insisted to Lily more than a handful of times, until she’d thrown a pillow at him.

"Your ego doesn’t have to worry," she’d told him. "I’m not putting it in there."

"Ego—this has nothing to do with me, this is all about Remus and Bea. I was never bothered that my mates betrayed me by shagging the women I’d been technically dating on the show—"

Lily had hummed disbelievingly and kept on writing.

"We've loved what we've read of it so far," said Isabella.

"Seriously, you're so talented," Bonnie agreed. "I can't wait to see that miserable cow taken down a few pegs."

"Girls," said Euphemia, sweeping over to lay a hand each on Bonnie and Isabella’s shoulders, "could you follow me into the kitchen and help us move the cake?"

"There's cake?" said James and Lily hopefully and in unison.

"Of course. Beatrice’s mother was kind enough to make it." Euphemia smiled indulgently at Lily. "If only I’d been able to let you in on the secret, dear. We could have had you jump out of a cake."

"That would be a waste of good cake," said James.

"And so insanitary," Lily agreed, frowning.

"You know, I thought half the fun of having a daughter-in-law as clever as Lily would be that
she’d side with me against him, but she flat-out refuses,” said Euphemia cheerfully, as she wrangled a giggling Bonnie and Isabella in the direction of the door. "I can’t begin to tell you how I suffer…"

As the three women disappeared into the kitchen, Lily dropped her arm to her side and turned to face James fully, one eyebrow lifted in question.

"I’m an accessory, am I?" she said, with a lilt of amusement in her voice.

"They think I meant jewelry," he said in confidence, "but I was really talking about a legal type of accessory to crime, Ruby Raptor."

"Well, I’m still offended. I’m a full accomplice, not a mere accessory. You think I’d only learn about your adventures after the fact?"

Despite her words, her eyes were alight with happiness. The other party guests chattered away in the background. Someone had put on an earlier episode of the show and muted it—Isabella and Lily were talking in the castle kitchen on screen—but no one was really watching. Why would they, when real life was around them and so much more interesting than some quickly-filmed and absolutely-contrived "reality" TV show?

He and Lily had been through hell together: Rita’s machinations, Helena Hodge’s existence, France, and now this torturous party.

They didn’t have everything figured out. They kept arguing about which part of town they should live in after they finished traveling. He still hadn’t met Lily’s sister, which was really weird but she was insistent on keeping him away from her. And he had no clue what sort of career would really interest him in the long-run, even after taking multiple Buzzfeed quizzes.

Life hadn’t all neatly wrapped up at the end of filming. That wasn’t how things worked.

But at least Lily would be there with him to work through it.

"Fair enough," James faced her and placed both hands on her hips, drawing her closer for a kiss, "partner."

Lily made it ten minutes into the finale before she couldn't stomach the embarrassment and hid away in the bathroom with Algernon.

It was fine, though. James joined her in there shortly afterwards and tasked himself with making her a dress out of toilet paper—a fun activity, he said, with the added bonus of wasting his mother's toilet paper to teach her a lesson.

When Euphemia came looking for them, Lily merely banged three times on the locked door with her fist and cried, "We're having sex!" This wasn't remotely true because Peter had been leaving the bathroom when she’d arrived and there was a funky smell in the room, but it made Euphemia so happy that she left them to their own devices.

Lily and James had gotten quite good at dealing with his mother together. As in all things, they could accomplish so much more when they worked as a team.

No amount of teamwork, however, could save them from the post-finale speeches.

Euphemia was the first to take the microphone when James and Lily—proudly sporting her toilet
paper gown over her dress—returned to the party. She gushed about Lily's charms and qualities, spoke at length about how fulfilling it was to see her only son find love with the right woman, and dropped several unsubtle hints about weddings and grandchildren.

Next up was Beatrice, who proudly recapped the hand she had played in their romance and continually used terms like "shipping" and "endgame." This made Lily feel as if Bea was monologuing rabidly about two fictional characters, rather than two of her dearest friends in the world—one of whom she lived with.

Finally, Sirius took the spotlight. He had prepared a video presentation of his top ten moments from the show, and all but one of them focused solely on Sirius's best smiles, witty quips, and tailored suits.

The tenth clip was of James retching after he'd climbed off a horse, which immediately prompted James to decry Sirius as a filthy traitor, especially since he'd used Careless Whisper as the backing track.

The choice of music offended James more than anything else.

"It's my favorite song, not his," he whined, for the third time in five minutes. "That he would use it against me is unforgivable."

Lily didn't need to be told that it was his favorite song. James thought it was great fun to serenade her with it when he was drunk on peppermint schnapps. And sometimes on victory.

"If you're going to tell people what your favorite song is, you can't complain when they use it to burn you in their audiovisual presentations," said Beatrice, with a wave of her champagne glass.

"Particularly not if that person is Sirius," Remus agreed.

They tilted their heads towards one another, each standing with an arm wrapped around the other's waist. Remus was wearing yet another of the many blazers that Bea had purchased for him, this time in a cool powder blue that matched her cocktail dress perfectly. Beatrice was a big fan of coordinated couples' outfits and wasted a lot of time trying to convince Lily to adopt the same passion.

"My angel is so right," Bea enthused. "As always."

"As are you, darling," Remus returned, and dropped a kiss on Bea's nose.

"Oh, sod off." Lily knew they were right, but would not abandon her boyfriend in their shared hour of need. "You look like the twins from The Shining."

"Says the woman wearing toilet paper," said Bea.

"It's compostable," James said. "Very sustainable. Much better for the environment than your outfits."

"My angel is so right," Lily drawled, mimicking Beatrice's sickly sweet tone. A sudden brush against her leg alerted her to Algernon's presence, and she bent down to scoop the handsome feline into her arms. "Besides, Algernon likes my dress just fine. Don't you, darling?"

"That isn't an indicator of quality," Bea pointed out. "He approves of every single thing you do."

"Because his taste is second to none."
"You treat that cat like you're his mother and it's creepy," she retorted.

"He treats her," James said haughtily, "with the love and respect she deserves. You're just jealous he doesn't care for you as much."

"I'm not jealous," said Beatrice, frowning. "I just don't understand why she'll cook filet steak for a cat, but not for me, her best friend in the world."

"Because you have opposable thumbs. How's he meant to cook his own steak?" Lily pressed a kiss to Algernon's fluffy head and he meowed happily. "Besides, Remus cooks for you all the time."

"And I repay his kindness in a myriad of fun and erotic ways."

Remus's cheeks became tinged with pink, and he coughed discreetly into his closed fist.

"And on that awkward note," said Lily, "Jack and Ruby have an urgent matter of national security to attend to. Please excuse us."

James slipped an arm around Lily's shoulder. "Can't share the details, of course. We're professionals. Dear, did you bring the rappel gun?"

"I never travel without it."

"You're going to try to steal the banner, aren't you?" said Remus with a sly smile.

"I didn't hear that, and I won't respond to it," said Lily, and turned away from them both, while Algernon meowed his agreement in her arms.

James kept his arm around her shoulders until they'd snuck past Grace and Euphemia, exited the living room and found solace inside Fleamont's mercifully empty study.

Lily set Algernon down on the floor and he immediately darted from the room because he was an unmitigated genius who knew when Lily and James needed privacy. Particularly when their master plan to steal and destroy a banner had been rumbled.

"There's one thing I won't miss while we're away," she told James as he closed the door, shutting out the sound of his mother's tipsy laughter that floated in from the living room. "Hearing their weird sex adventures through my bedroom wall. I've learned so many dirty Spanish phrases that I never needed to know."

Remus was moving into the flat Lily shared with Bea in Lily's absence, so they would be able to continue their raucous lovemaking uninterrupted.

"It's the only exercise he's allowed with his heart condition," said James. "But I can't say I'm heartbroken that I get you to myself for so long. The opposite, really. Heartfixed?"

Luckily for Lily, her own heart was in the best shape of its life, though her boyfriend could be always counted on to help it skip a beat or two with an unexpected act of kindness.

Boyfriend. Best friend. Soon-to-be travelling companion. One-day husband.

Lily's wedding finger had been bare for a while—that gaudy monstrosity of a ring had fetched an obscene amount of money for their upcoming trip—and Euphemia never missed a chance to wonder after its replacement. She'd already taken Lily’s mum shopping for mother-of-the-bride hats, which had prompted James to suggest that they’d elope to Vegas if his mum wasn't careful.
For her part, Lily suspected that her finger wouldn't stay bare for very long, but that was for her and James to decide in their own time, and on their own terms.

"Heartfixed works," she said, smiling fondly at him. "Do you have any idea how excited I am to hold your hand and taste fresh air at the same time, or kiss you in public without feeling like a hardened criminal?"

He sauntered toward her, thumbs hanging from his pockets. "It's criminal how you make me feel," he said. Then he made a face. "No, I take it back, that was awful."

She choked out a laugh and took a step backwards, moving just out of his reach. The back of her legs brushed against the desk's edge.

"That would never make it as dialogue in Jack and Ruby's blockbuster movie franchise," she informed him. "Try a bit harder and I'll snog you, maybe."

He closed the step between them, sliding a hand alongside her cheek into her hair. "You want to hear something that'll turn you on?"

"In your parents' house? In the middle of a party? In this economy?" She quirked a sly smile at him. "Obviously."

He leaned in toward her, wild tufts of hair tickling her face as he placed his mouth close to her ear and said in a low voice, "We won't see our parents for months."

It wasn't what he said, but the way he said it, the way his lips brushed against her skin and his fingers threaded through her hair, and the warm, familiar feeling of his body tucked against hers—exactly where they both belonged, so close but not nearly close enough—that really did her in.

James often liked to say that keeping up with her was a challenge, but he could make her perfectly dizzy with the barest of touches, so he was batting with an advantage.

"Oh," said Lily softly. "That's...that sounds nice."

"Mhm. Months with no parental or friend interference. Just you, and me, and wherever we are. No one conspiring against us except other professional secret agents."

"Just you and me," she repeated, and shivered when he pressed a kiss to the side of her neck, her eyelids fluttering shut. "James?"

"Hmm?"

"I love you."

She felt the curve of his smile against her skin. "I love you, too," he said. "And I will follow you anywhere."

"Even France?"

"You love me too much to ever make me go there," he murmured, and kissed her neck again. "And I love that about you." He paused. "But I'd still follow you to that cursed abyss, if I knew it would make you happy."

He really would have done, much as he despised the place. That was just James, who spilled over with the best of intentions, and loved her more than he disliked anything.
Lily had wanted a croissant, once upon a time, so he'd given her two dozen. She'd wanted a hand to hold as she wound her way through life, and his was never very far from her reach. She'd wanted to love someone so much that loving them made her chest hurt, so James had managed that too, though it was mostly Lily's sides that ached. He made her laugh an awful lot.

"I couldn't possibly be happy if I knew you were suffering, but I've got another suggestion for our first mission abroad," she told him. James pulled away to look into her eyes, and Lily crooked a questioning eyebrow. "What do you think about—"

"Santorini?"

She smiled coyly, her fingers making idle exploration of the back of his shirt, clenching in the fabric, pulling him flush against her. "Oh, Jack, it seems you've read my mind again."

"So long as we can keep our banging indoors, I'm all yours in Santorini, Ruby."

"We're indoors and all alone this very minute," she reminded him. "Though we do still have that banner to steal."

"First things first," he said. "Then we abscond with that monstrosity."

They were so thoroughly well-matched in every way that Lily knew, without fail, that this would not be her last time saying a particular word to him. A word that conferred partnership and consideration and fairness. A word they both equally respected and honored.

She pressed a kiss to his lips and whispered, her mouth smiling against his, "Deal."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who has read, enjoyed, and commented on this fic! It was such a blast to write and we're both so happy to have been able to share it!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!