Perfect Match

by HiddenTreasures

Summary

James grew up hearing the legends of soulmates. How two—or three or four or however many—people could find each other by writing messages to each other on their skin, and he spent much of his time imagining himself with a soulmate, someone who would be his perfect match.

Notes

I am going to try and write a little bit of this every week and track them through childhood and into teenage years and eventual adulthood.
James grew up hearing the legends of soulmates. How two—or three or four or however many—people could find each other by writing messages to each other on their skin, and he spent much of his time imagining himself with a soulmate, someone who would be his perfect match.

Everyone in James’s year thought it was ridiculous (after all, they were still so obsessed with cooties that they couldn’t bear to think that there was another person destined for them) but James yearned for the legend to be true. Not everyone had a soulmate. Soulmates weren’t rare, per se, but they weren’t the rule either, and there were people that just… didn’t have one. For every one soulbound person, three unbound could be found, and James desperately wished to be that one.

Nobody seemed to understand him; his peers teased and bullied him, and he even had trouble connecting with his parents at times. But a soulmate would be his other half, his best friend, and James wanted one so badly he ached. He didn’t want to be alone, one of the Unclaimed.

He started trying to connect with his imagined soulmate when he was five years old, the age everyone was when they were first told about the existence of soulmates, because that was the age when the soulbond could first be initiated. James silently envied the girl in his class whose hand had her soulmate’s name written on it day in and day out while his own skin remained blank. One day he picked up a pen and tried to stop his hands from shaking as he wrote a simple “Hello” on his wrist. He stared at his arm for several minutes, but nothing was forthcoming.

He wasn’t disappointed; after all, maybe his soulmate was asleep or something. Or couldn’t read English. Or couldn’t read or write yet. Or they weren’t quite five years old yet. (He dared not think of the fact he might be one of the Unclaimed).

For the next several months, the word “hello” was a permanent mark on his wrist as he re-wrote the word every time it got washed off. His parents thought it was cute at first, but grew worried that their five-year-old was getting too obsessed with an idea that might not even be true. While they were soulmates, a lot of their friends were Unclaimed, and they didn’t want their child to go through the agony of realizing it, or the agony of waiting. He was only five years old, after all, and they wanted their little boy to be as happy and lighthearted as every other five-year-old.

But James was determined. (“Just because it hasn’t happened yet doesn’t mean it never will,” was his motto.) He still had many more years until he would be classified as Unclaimed—his eighteenth birthday—and he refused to give up on his soulmate.

It was hard, though, to stay optimistic, as month after month his arm remained bare of anything other than his “Hello”.

Shortly after his sixth birthday, his message got erased and he forgot to rewrite it. He decided with a heavy heart to not rewrite it; nearly eight months of disappointment had really been weighing on him, and he decided to let it happen when it happened. *If it happened.*
However, he did indulge himself twice a year, on his birthday and on New Year’s; he would write “Hello” and let it fade naturally from his skin when he got no reply.

His eleventh birthday came and went—he didn’t bother writing to the soulmate he feared didn’t exist—and the holidays were soon approaching.

This year, he finally stayed awake until midnight, and when the cheering and singing began, he penned a quick “Hello, Happy New Year” onto his forearm.

He went to bed with a heart heavier than any eleven-year-old’s should be. Even though he still had six and a half years to go until he would be officially Unclaimed, he already accepted his fate. He should have known better than to get his hopes up, but he really, really wanted a soulmate, a best friend, and to be someone else’s soulmate. It hurt to think that he couldn’t be matched with anyone on Earth.

“Give us a smile, Jamie,” his mum murmured, her heart breaking for her son as she tucked him into bed as fireworks echoed in the distance.

His lips curled up into a stiff attempt of a smile, and his mother sighed. She pressed her lips to his forehead and whispered, “I know this is hard for you, James. Try not to be too discouraged. There’s nothing wrong with not having a soulmate. Not everyone has one, and that’s okay. I hate seeing you like this sweetheart. I miss my little boy and his beautiful smile. Can you do that for me James, and try and be happy with yourself?”

James sighed. He loved his mum and dad dearly, but they just couldn’t possibly understand it. They were each other’s soulmate, and weren’t able to fully understand the heartache of being one of the Unclaimed.

But he forced his smile to look more genuine. He really did want to try and be happy with his life as it was, because he was tired of feeling so exhausted and anxious all the time as he waited for a message that never came.

He resolved to take joy everywhere he could find it.

“Yeah,” he said, reaching up to give his mother a hug. “Love you. Night, Mum.”

“Goodnight sweetheart. Happy New Year.”

When he awoke the next morning, James forced himself not to look at his arm. This was Day One of his New Year’s resolution.

He was able to keep the resolution for all of eight minutes.

In the shower, he extended his left arm out in front of him to run the soapy washcloth over it, and as he made a pass over his wrist, a flash of red caught his eye.

His hands shook as he rotated his wrist closer to his eyes. Scrawled sloppily under his smeared message was a simple “Hello” in red ink.

“Mum! Dad!”

He hastily threw on a bathrobe, not caring he was soaking wet and still had soap bubbles clinging to his skin.

His parents frantically met him in the hallway, worried something was terribly wrong. But they saw
their son dripping water onto their carpet with his arm proudly outstretched to show them the smudged message his soulmate wrote him. His mother smiled tearfully at him, her heart bursting with love and happiness for him, and she pressed a delicate kiss to the ink on his arm and then to his temple before shooing him back to the shower.

“But what if it washes off?” he asked fearfully, continuing to drip onto the carpet as he refused to move. “I need to write them back so they know I’m not ignoring them!”

“I think they’ll understand you need to shower, love;” his mum said, turning him by the shoulders and marching him to the bathroom, where the shower was still running.

James reluctantly finished his shower with great haste, and when he dressed himself (with his shirt on backwards), he ran to his room, grabbed a pen, and wrote, “Hello! I’m James.”

He waited a few minutes, but nothing appeared. His heart sank. He hadn’t imagined it all, did he? He paced his room, fixed his shirt, and reorganized his books. When he put the last book back, a hint of red caught his eye.

*Rose.*

“Rose,” he breathed, staring at the words on his arm. They were big and messy and the ‘s’ looked like it was capitalized and the heavy inking around the ‘e’ made it appear as though the letter was attempted several times before she finally got it right. James realized it was written in a child’s hand.

“How old are you?” he wrote.

A few minutes passed until green ink appeared on his arm.

“5.” After a few seconds, more ink appeared: “And a half.”

“Five years old,” he marveled. *No wonder she couldn’t write me back… she can barely write now. No matter… “Nice to meet you Rose,” he wrote, smiling at his arm.

“James?”

He jumped when he heard his father’s voice in the doorway.

“James, breakfast is getting cold, mate.”

“Her name is Rose,” he said, showing his arm to his father. “Isn’t that the prettiest name you ever heard?”

His father smiled and ruffled James’s damp hair. “Yep, right after Vera and James. I’m very happy for you, son. But come on, time for breakfast.”

James tucked his pen in his pocket and followed his dad to the dining room. “How old were you when you started talking to Mum? What did you write? Who started it? Did you ever worry you were gonna be Unclaimed? When did you first meet Mum? When can I meet Rose? Do I have to wait ‘til we’re both eighteen? That’s forever away!”

His father chuckled; he knew his son would be unstoppable now. The lad had always soaked up all the information he could and never rested until his curiosity was satisfied.

So over the next several days, James had heard (nearly) every last detail of how his parents met and got to know each other. They encouraged him to talk with Rose as much as he wanted, but they also
reminded him that she was still very little, and could still hardly read or write, and her smaller
attention span meant it might take a while for her to write him back.

But James wasn’t discouraged. He was so overjoyed that he had a soulmate that he was quite content
with communicating with Rose whenever and however she could.

He learned that Rose really liked to draw, and his arms were often decorated with random shapes,
colors, stick figures, flowers, and anything else that Rose’s imagination came up with. James thought
every drawing she made him was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen, and he always told her that
she’d grow up to be an artist.

_Artists dont mayk mone_, was her reply.

“You shouldn’t worry about money,” he wrote, frowning. “Do what you like.”

_Not wat mummy says._

James scowled at his arm.

“Well, I say you can do whatever you like, because you’re brilliant,” he wrote, nodding resolutely.

_Thanks James_. James smiled at his arm and tucked himself under his blankets, almost ready to go to
sleep, when more ink appeared. _Your my best frend._

James’s heart fluttered in his chest as he wrote, “You’re my best friend, too, Rose.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Wherein James has a bit of an anxiety attack and Rose gets injured.

After a month, the novelty of having a soulmate still hadn’t worn off for James. He and Rose talked every day, about anything and everything. He could see Rose’s vocabulary and spelling improving as she tried to write more and more. He still made sure to encourage her doodling, and had even developed a little game with her where they were each only allowed to make one line and attach it to the previous mark the other had drawn, and see what picture they could draw together. That was one of his favorite games to play with her, along with Pictionary, hangman, and tic-tac-toe.

Soon the holidays were over, which meant it was time for James and his family to leave their home in Scotland once more and head for the United States, where his parents were guest lecturing and doing research in Boston.

“I promise to still write you every day,” he wrote as he sat with his parents in the airport, “but the times will be a bit different.”

Of course Rose was understanding, and she promised to write him whenever she was awake.

However, one morning almost a month and a half after that blessed New Year’s Day, James stared quizzically at his arm, which still bore yesterday’s bedtime message of “Good morning, Rose!” There was nothing new from her, which was a little odd. It sometimes took her several hours to reply to him, but she usually always wrote him back within the same day he’d written to her, and she usually always had a reply by the time he woke up.

He shrugged and got up, but realized school had been cancelled due to an overnight snow and ice storm. He hunkered down on the sofa with a mug of hot chocolate, a blanket, a book, and his pen, content with his day off.

He was so immersed in Agatha Christie’s mystery that he hadn’t realized the time until his mum called to him that lunch was ready.

He blinked at her, then glanced at the clock, then at his arm. His stomach sank when there were still no new words from Rose. He looked at the clock again; it had been twenty-two hours and seventeen minutes since he last heard from Rose. He traced his thumb over the fading picture of a rainbow arching over a row of flowers, her gift to him to cheer him up because he was sick of winter.

He uncapped his pen, but paused with the tip to his wrist. Maybe Rose didn’t want to talk with him anymore, and she figured if she ignored him, he would stop writing to her. Maybe she’d gotten bored of him, like all of the other people that had once called him their friend. His chest felt too tight; he couldn’t even keep his soulmate interested for more than six weeks.

He sighed as he recapped his pen, but tucked it into his pocket. Just in case. Maybe Rose was just busy. Or ill. He hated to think of her laid up in bed, but that image soothed his anxieties.

When dinnertime came and she still hadn’t written back, it was getting harder to assure himself that
she wasn’t ignoring him.

His parents noticed his low mood, but he brushed them off, saying it was just mid-winter blues and he was upset that he and Rose couldn’t talk as easily as when they’d been home in Scotland. Which wasn’t technically a lie…

However, after four days of silence, James was starting to think something horrible had happened to Rose. What if she wasn’t writing back to him because she couldn’t write back to him? What if something terrible happened and she was hurt or…

He rubbed at his burning eyes as he refused to even indulge in the idea that Rose might have somehow died. He had just found her; she couldn’t be gone.

“James?”

He turned his head to look at his dad, who was leaning against the door frame.

“James, are you all right?” he asked, stepping into the room when he saw how red James’s eyes were.

“Would I know if… If a soulmate… What happens if a soulmate dies?” he finally asked quietly, rubbing his thumb over Rose’s name. “Would the other person know it?”

“Why? Has something happened to Rose?” his dad asked worriedly.

James’s vision went blurry, and he sniffled as he shrugged a shoulder. He felt his bed dip and soon he was enveloped in warm and familiar arms. He buried his face into his dad’s chest and clung to him tightly.

“I don’t know, Dad. Rose stopped writing to me last week and I don’t know what I did, or if she’s hurt, or…or…or…” James hiccupped out a sob and shook with the effort of holding back his tears, but he was so scared that Rose was gone and he was alone again. Four days of fear boiled over, and he was soon gasping for breath as he cried into his dad’s chest.

“Breathe, mate, just breathe,” his dad whispered, holding his son tightly as he wracked his brains on what to do or say to soothe him. He hoped to God that Rose wasn’t dead, but why else had she been ignoring his son? “Shh, it’s okay, it’s okay. Just breathe. I’m sure there’s an explanation.”

“I don’t know what to do!” James whimpered.

“Me either,” his dad admitted. “But we’ll think of something. Okay? We’ll figure it out. In the morning, though.”

James nodded his agreement, and he wriggled under the covers, feeling exhausted. His dad pressed a lingering kiss to his forehead and brushed James’s hair back as he whispered, “Try and get some sleep. I love you.”

“Love you, too,” James murmured, burrowing deeper under the covers.

He closed his eyes and barely registered the sound of his door clicking shut before he was asleep.

The next morning, James rolled out of bed, having slept more than he had all week. He rubbed his hands over his aching eyes, and glanced down at his left arm. Only his handwriting decorated his skin, and he sighed in defeat.
But as he arched his back and lifted his arms above his head, his sleeve fell down, revealing small, neat handwriting he didn’t recognize in blue ink on his right forearm.

*Rose is okay. Broke her arm. Can’t write. She says hi.*

James stared stupidly at his arm for a minute, his heart racing in his chest. Rose was alive. She was *alive!* She was alive, and she wasn’t ignoring him! He whooped out a sound that was half-laugh, half-sob as he hugged his arm to his chest for just a minute before he grabbed a pen and started figuring out how to write left-handed.

oOoOo

Rose whimpered as she cradled her left arm to her chest as she sat with her mum in the A&E. She watched as new messages from James appeared on her arm, and she wished she could write him back, but the bruised, tender skin made that impossible.

Her name was finally called, and she followed her mum and the nurse back to a room to get X-rays done on her arm. The X-ray machine was big and loud, and Rose wished she could be at home with her pen, drawing with James. He wasn’t a great drawer, but he always made her smile, and she already missed him.

“So what’s their name?”

Rose glanced up as a technician fiddled with the machine and settled Rose’s arm where it needed to be.

“That’s from your soulmate, isn’t it?” she asked, nodding to Rose’s ink-covered arm.

Rose heard her mum scoff from the corner, and she saw her roll her eyes. Rose dropped her gaze to her arm.

“James,” she whispered, running a shaking hand over his badly-drawn stick figure, marred as it was by an ugly purple bruise and an unnatural lump. “Do you have a soulmate?”

“Mhm.”

“What’s his name?” Rose asked curiously. The only other soulbound people she had met so far was the dinner lady at school and the Millers down the hall.

“Her name,” the technician corrected gently as she carefully lifted Rose’s arm to be underneath the beam, “is Jessica.”

“I don’t think talking about that nonsense is going to fix her arm up, so get on with it, will you?”

The technician glared at Jackie, but she finally stepped away from Rose and back behind the controls of the machine.

“Hold as still as you can for me, Rose,” she instructed.

After the technician had all of the angles she needed, Jackie and Rose were shuffled off to another waiting room until the pictures were developed and a doctor could explain them.

“Well I could’ve told you that!” Jackie snapped when the doctor confirmed that Rose did indeed have a broken arm. “Just look at the lumps and bruising!”

Rose watched sadly as her arm and all of James’s words were covered up by a cast that encased her
entire forearm and wrapped up to just above her elbow.

As she sat on the sofa that evening, she clumsily dropped her pen half a dozen times as she tried to hold it in her casted left hand. But the coordination wasn’t there, and frankly it hurt.

“Would you stop that?” Jackie snapped as the pen dropped to the carpet once more.

“James will be worried,” she said, trying and failing again to hold a pen.

“Oh, not James again,” Jackie huffed. “If you ask me, you could use the distance. S’not healthy, talking all the time to each other.”

“We’re soulmates, Mum,” Rose explained for what seemed like the hundredth time. She didn’t understand why her mum disliked James so much.

“Soulmates,” Jackie scoffed. “Load of rubbish if you ask me.”

Rose ignored her mum’s words and bit her lip as she adjusted her hold on the pen. She hadn't talked to James all day, and she cursed herself once more for letting Mickey taunt her into climbing the biggest tree in the park. She tucked her tongue into the empty space where a tooth used to be as she pressed the pen to her right arm. She gasped as a burning ache radiated through her arm, and a moment later, the pen was yanked out of her hand.

She looked up to see her mum scowling and putting the cap back on the pen. “Thats enough. I’m not letting you hurt yourself to talk to that boy.”

Rose tried to argue, but a yawn swallowed her words. The medicine they’d given her was making her sleepy, and she hardly noticed when she was picked up and carried to bed.

For the next few days, Rose’s arm remained resolutely blank of ink as she tried and failed to master writing with her useless left hand.

She traced her fingers over the hard plaster hiding her surely faded conversations with James. It had been four days since she had last spoken to him. She hoped he was okay, and not worrying about her, and she wondered if he missed her as much as she missed him.

“Mummy,” she asked that morning over breakfast.

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“Could you write something to James for me?” she asked hesitantly. “I just want to let him know I’m okay.”

Jackie looked over her shoulder from where she was washing the dishes.

“I’m busy right now, Rose,” she said.

“Well, after you’re done?”

“I’ve got more important things to worry about than that boy,” Jackie said shortly. Taking Rose to the hospital had been an unexpected expense to her already thin budget, and she was taking on a few extra shifts for the next few weeks to try to make up the difference. “I need to go food shopping when you’re finished. It’ll be a quick trip; I know you’re still not feeling very well.”

True to her word, Jackie had them home within thirty minutes with bags lighter than a usual week, but if Rose noticed, she didn’t say anything. Jackie had just put away the last of the food when she
found Rose crying on the couch. She rushed over to her daughter, fluttering her hands around Rose’s cast.

“What’s wrong sweetheart? Tell me what hurts. I’ll call the doctor, just tell me what’s wrong.”

“I miss James,” she hiccupped, staring at her hands and waiting for her mum’s disapproval. “I just want to let him know what happened, but I can’t, and he’s gonna hate me and think I don’t like him anymore and he’s not gonna wanna be my soulmate anymore!”

Jackie looked at her in alarm as she opened her arms for Rose. She held her little girl and shushed her softly, hating to see her in such a state.

“Okay,” Jackie said softly, running her fingers through Rose’s hair, her heart breaking as she felt her little body trembling. “Okay. I’ll write to this James bloke for you. Just this once, mind. All right?”

“You will?” Rose sniffled, rubbing her nose on her sleeve.

“Yeah,” Jackie sighed. “I don’t like it, but I don’t like seeing you cry, sweetheart. Give me your arm.”

Rose thrust her right arm at her mum.

“Tell him I broke my arm and I’ve been wanting to write him but I can’t, but I’m still gonna try, and that I miss him and hope he’s okay and I say hi and how is he?”

Jackie quirked an eyebrow at Rose, before scrawling an abbreviated version of the message on her daughter’s arm. They both watched for a few minutes, but no ink from James was forthcoming. Rose wasn’t discouraged—she knew it was still nighttime for him in Boston—but Jackie seemed to take his lack of response as proof that she’d been right about soulmates all along.

The morning drained into the afternoon, and Rose watched the clock anxiously. It was 12:30pm, about the time James would usually start talking with her. She focused more on her arm than the program on the telly, hoping he wouldn’t be upset about her silence.

As dinnertime drew nearer, Rose was getting worried that James was angry at her, until messy black handwriting slowly appeared under her mother’s handwriting.

Rose! I was so worried! I’m so sorry you broke your arm. I hope it doesn’t hurt too badly and that it mends quickly.

She smiled at the writing, even as she felt a pang of guilt that she had worried him. The words were messier than normal, and Rose finally realized he had to write to her with his left hand now, too. Well, if he would do that for her, she would do it for him. She picked up her red pen and set it in the fingertips of her left hand, curling her fingers clumsily around the pen as she used her cast for leverage.

It felt awkward and unwieldy, but she tightened and adjusted her grip until she was sure the pen wouldn’t fall out of her hand. She pressed the tip to a clean strip of skin on the back of her hand and slowly wrote “I missed you”.

The letters were a mess and she hoped he could read them, but she was proud of herself for having at least written something.

I missed you, too Rose. So much. Please be more careful, I couldn’t stand it if something happened to you.
“I will,” Rose promised. “How is Boston?”

Rose smiled as she watched messy black handwriting appear rapidly on her arm as he told her about snow and school and the United States. He sometimes used words bigger than Rose’s vocabulary, but she loved how excited he seemed to be about everything.

She wished she could travel as much as James. One day, when she was older, she and James would go everywhere together, but for now she settled for hearing it second-hand from him.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Wherein they celebrate Rose’s birthday and the impending summer holidays, and James gets a bit of news.

They both got faster with writing with their left hand as they waited for Rose’s arm to mend. By the time her six weeks were up and she could get her cast off, they were proficiently ambidextrous. Even though they could return to their dominant hand, they often used their left hands in order to utilize both arms as writing surfaces.

As spring marched on and left behind all traces of winter, James was amazed as he watched Rose’s spelling and handwriting improve exponentially.

*I’ve been reading,* she explained, *so I can talk to you easier. And Mummy and my teacher help to.*

His chest felt warm as he beamed at his arm, so proud of Rose, and so humbled that she was working so hard so they could talk more easily and about more things.

As the end of April approached, James was counting down the days left of school. He loved school, he really did, but he wasn’t very fond of his classmates. Well, his classmates weren’t very fond of him, rather. A lot of them made fun of his accent or his bookishness or the way he looked, what with his disproportionate, buggy eyes. But after the Christmas holidays, their teasing grew worse when they realized he had a soulmate that was half his age, whom he was absolutely obsessed with.

As much as James adored Rose, he was unhappy that he had given his peers yet another thing to tease him about. He tried to curb his enthusiasm, and he didn’t talk to or about Rose anymore unless he was alone or at home, but it was too late, and everyone at school knew about Rose.

“Well, I wrote to Rose after he crossed off another day on his calendar, then went to the kitchen for breakfast. “It’ll be easier to talk to each other when I’m back home.”

James poured himself a bowl of cereal and plopped down at the table as he waited for Rose’s answer.

*Yay! Guess what?*

James smiled at his arm as he shoveled a spoonful of cereal into his mouth.

“What?”

He had nearly finished his breakfast by the time Rose wrote, *It’s my birthday soon!*

James stared at his arm. Her birthday. Her first birthday since they’d met. What was he supposed to do? Was he supposed to get her a gift? Was he supposed to be extra special nice to her? Short of proclaiming his undying love and appreciation for her—which he was 99.9% sure would scare her off if he were to do that—he hadn’t the foggiest idea of what to do for her birthday.
“That’s so exciting! Which day?” he wrote before he hurriedly slurped down the dregs of soggy cereal and milk, and placed his bowl into the sink.

He then wandered down the hall and to his parent’s home office. James knocked on the open door, and his dad looked up from grading papers.

“Dad, did you do anything for Mum when it was her birthday but you hadn’t met yet?” James asked. “Rose’s birthday is coming up, and I don’t know what to do.”

His dad leaned back in his chair and capped his pen.

“I would send your mother a card and flowers, usually,” he answered. “But we were both a bit older than you and Rose.”

“Would Rose not like flowers?” James asked, confused.

“She might,” his dad allowed, “but she is only five.”

“She’ll be six,” James mumbled defensively, feeling the tips of his ears go warm.

He didn’t know what else he should get her. Besides, he thought girls liked getting flowers. Rose certainly loved drawing them. He unconsciously rubbed his fingertips across the latest row of flowers she had drawn.

His dad noticed the drawing, and he smiled reassuringly. “You know what. Never mind. I think she’d love flowers.”

“Yeah?” James asked, a slow smile creeping over his lips. But his grin fell slightly as he sheepishly asked, “Can you help me order them for her?”

His dad was already packing away the half-graded exams and firing up the computer, gesturing for James to come around and sit at the desk with him.

James grabbed one of his dad’s pens as he rolled up his sleeve.

April 27. You?

“October 27,” he answered. “What’s your address?”

His dad had already searched for florists in London, and he waited patiently until Rose replied with her address.

*But we’re not allowed to meet yet, James.*

“I know. But that doesn’t mean I have to completely ignore your birthday” he wrote, watching as his dad found a couple of florists within a few miles of Rose’s home. He and James skimmed the reviews, price range, and quality before settling on a place a few blocks away from Rose.

With his dad’s help, James phoned the florist and placed his order. He stubbornly refused to let his dad pay for them, and instead gave his own fledgling bank account information. After confirming the order, the address, and the date no less than four times, James finally hung up.

For the next six days, James worried that Rose wouldn’t like his gift. Maybe he should’ve gotten her a toy or something, or an actual gift that a six-year-old might want or use.

But Rose reassured him that she would love it, no matter what he’d gotten, and more than once she
tried to wheedle him into telling her what it was.

“No, no,” he grinned, “you’ll just have to wait until tomorrow. It should be there by breakfast. Goodnight, Rose.”

oOoOo

Rose could hardly sleep, excited as she was for her gift from James. He refused to tell her what he had gotten for her, and the suspense was driving her mad. Finally, the morning of the twenty-seventh dawned and Rose was awake far before her usual wake-up time.

She automatically glanced at her arm; James always had a message waiting for her. Today it was ‘Good morning, Rose! Happy Birthday!’

Beside the words was a poor drawing of two stick figures, both in party hats and holding hands while a lop-sided birthday cake sat in front of the smaller stick figure she assumed was supposed to be her. Six tiny candles were atop the cake, but James must have misjudged the amount of space he needed, because only five fit perfectly across the top of the cake, and he had forced a sixth one that angled out at the corner.

She loved it so much, and she wrote back, “Thanks, James! This is lovely!”

The smell of cooking bacon finally wafted into Rose’s room, and her stomach gurgled hungrily.

Her mum was already up and working on a birthday breakfast for Rose.

“Happy birthday, sweetheart,” Jackie murmured into Rose’s ear as she knelt down to scoop Rose into a hug.

Rose giggled and hugged her mum tightly.

“Smells good!” Rose said when Jackie released her.

“I hope so. A proper English breakfast,” she said proudly, flipping the bacon and putting bread in the toaster.

As Jackie was clearing up the mess from breakfast and Rose was off brushing her teeth, there was a knock at the door.

“Yeah, just a mo’,” she called, shutting off the water and drying her hands on a dish towel.

Rose came racing down the hall, her eyes lit up in excitement as she reached to unlatch the deadbolt.

“Oi,” Jackie said, grabbing Rose’s arm before she could open the door completely. “What do you think you’re doing, opening the door without checking who it is first?”

“James said he sent me something and that it would be here at breakfast,” Rose said. “This must be it.”

“You gave our address to a stranger?” Jackie said flatly.

“He’s not a stranger, Mum,” Rose said exasperatedly. “He’s James!”

“I don’t care who he is, I don’t want a pubescent boy knowing where my daughter lives!”

Rose scrunched her face. “What’s pubescent mean?”
Jackie rolled her eyes. “Ask James.”

Another, more insistent, knock sounded, and Jackie grumbled about the impatience of people as she swung open the door.

A young man was at the door holding a small bunch of dark red roses.

“Delivery for Rose Tyler,” he said, his eyes automatically going to Jackie.

“Me!” Rose squealed, reaching up for the flowers.

“Careful of the thorns, sweetheart,” Jackie said as the delivery man handed Rose the flowers.

“And this,” the man said, holding out an oval-ish shaped wrapped brown package.

“Thanks,” Jackie said, taking the package.

She latched the door and followed an excited Rose to the kitchen, unwrapping the brown package as she went. It contained a simple glass vase.

“Aren’t they beautiful, Mummy?” Rose squealed, sticking her nose in the bunch of roses and inhaling deeply. “No one’s ever gotten me flowers before!”

Jackie smiled and filled the vase with water, added the plant food, and helped Rose stick the six roses into the vase. A little card fell out of the flowers, and Rose picked it up.

“Six perfect roses for my perfect Rose on her sixth birthday,” she read slowly through a wide smile. “A very happy birthday to you, and to many more to come. James.”

Jackie had to grudgingly admit that this boy certainly had quite the romantic streak. With the way Rose was beaming and bouncing around everywhere, she couldn’t be anything but happy for her daughter.

“C’mon, love, you’ll be late for school,” Jackie said, shuffling Rose to her bedroom to find her shoes.

Rose ran to her room, and instead of looking for her shoes, she uncapped her pen.

“Thank you for the flowers and the card!” she wrote enthusiastically. “They’re really pretty!”

She heard her mum hollering for her again, and she guiltily stuck her feet into her shoes and sloppily laced them before rushing out so her mum could walk her to school.

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After the success of Rose’s birthday, time seemed to go backwards for James. The entire first half of May seemed to take several eternities, but finally he’d hit the three-week mark until school was over, and he was giddy with excitement.

*Just three more weeks until he was back in the UK,* he thought happily as his dad called him to dinner. *Just three more weeks until he was back to being in the same time zone as Rose.*

James tripped to a halt at the entrance to the dining room. A steak and kidney pie, his favorite, was on the table, and James could see a banana chocolate chip peanut butter cake cooling on the counter. A little white box with a blue ribbon was sitting at his place at the table.
“What’s all this about?” he asked cautiously, wondering what had prompted his parents to make this dinner in particular and get him a gift.

His parents exchanged a glance that did nothing to calm his nerves.

“Let’s enjoy dinner first,” his mum suggested, gesturing to the steaming plates of food. “Don’t want it to go cold. I know it’s your favorite.”

James was still a little wary of the occasion, but tucked into dinner with gusto. He managed to stuff down two helpings of food, and he wondered if he would have enough room for the cake.

“So what brought this on?” James asked, gesturing to the empty dishes.

His mum rested her hand on the back of his dad’s neck.

“We have a bit of news for you,” his dad finally said after he swallowed down the last of his wine. His eyes flickering to the handwriting on James’s arms. “I know you were looking forward to being back in Europe next year.”

“Edinburgh, right?” James asked, his stomach knotting as he willed his parents to confirm the plan.

His dad sighed and he said, “Well, another university just gave us a better offer, one we couldn’t refuse. We’ve signed a contract with Berkeley.”

“I don’t understand,” James whispered, hearing his pulse roar in his ears.

“I’m so sorry, mate,” his dad said. “I know how disappointed you must be. We’ll be spending the summer in Scotland, though. And the Christmas holidays.”

“You promised me we’d be in Scotland for the entire school year!” James exclaimed. “You promised!”

“I know, sweetheart,” his mum said. She leaned forward and pushed the little white box closer to his hands. “We’re so sorry, Jamie. Here, we thought you should have this. We’d hoped it might make this a little easier on you.”

James didn’t want any presents. He wanted his parents to tell him that they were living at home next year as planned.

“May I be excused?” he asked stiffly, glaring down at his empty plate. His dinner was an uncomfortable weight in his stomach.

“Yeah, sweetheart.”

He pushed himself out of his chair and stomped to his room, closing his door with more force than necessary. He knew he was acting childishly, but he had been so excited to finally be home in Scotland, where he and Rose would share the same time zone and be able to talk more easily.

He wished he could talk to Rose now, if nothing else than to vent, but she was asleep. Because she was five bloody hours ahead of him.

He collapsed in his bed and stared at his ceiling. His room at home had constellations drawn on it, courtesy of a three-month project he worked on with his dad. He wasn’t allowed to do that to this room, because they were only renting it for ten months.

He growled and punched at his pillow to get it to better support his neck before he grabbed his book
from his bedside table and lost himself in the latest Stephen King horror.

Nearly two hours after dinner, someone knocked on his door. It was his mum, with a plate of cake and that little white box.

“Jamie, darling, can I come in?”

He nodded and sat up, dog-earing the page he was on and setting the book on his bedside table. He eyed the cake hungrily. His mum made the best cake, and she had made his favorite, just because she knew how upset he would be with the news.

Guilt rippled through his stomach. His parents did their best to make him happy and to make all of their moves as easy on him as they could be. This time in particular, they’d tried extra hard to break the news, and he’d gone and stomped away.

“Sorry about earlier,” he mumbled in embarrassment as his mum sat on the edge of his bed.

She set the plate on top of his book and wrapped her arm around James.

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” she whispered, squeezing his shoulders as she pressed a kiss to his hair. “Your father and I really did try to stay in Europe. But Berkeley phoned and offered a lot of money for your father to lecture and for me to do research. New strains of a fungus that only used to be prevalent in Europe have started cropping up in the trees all along the West Coast. Botanists, plant pathologists, and geneticists around the world are setting up shop in California.”

“I understand,” James said, smiling in spite of himself at his mother’s enthusiasm for her work. “Really. I’ll be okay. How long are we there for?”

His mother hesitated, and James’s shoulders slumped.

“We’re not sure,” his mum finally answered. “We’ve signed a year-long contract as of now, but it takes much longer than a year to research this type of problem. But we’ll play it by ear. And if you’re really unhappy there, we can leave after the year is over. Okay?”

James nodded and accepted the plate of cake his mum offered him.

His mum sat with him as he ate his dessert, occasionally stealing a bite for herself, until the plate was clean.

She then handed him the tiny white box.

“Here,” she said. “We hope this will make it a little easier for you and Rose to stay in touch as often as you can.”

He opened it and saw a gorgeous silver pocket watch nestled in black velvet. It was thicker and heavy than he had expected it to be, and he hefted it in his palm for a minute as he admired the intricate interlocking circles decorating the outside of the watch. When he clicked it open, he saw that the clock face was already set to his local eastern standard time.

“We were going to give this to you for your birthday,” she explained. “But your father and I thought this might be a good gift to give you now, as our way of apologizing for breaking our promise and not getting you back to Europe next school year.”

“Er, thanks,” James said, a little confused by the gift.
His mum noticed, because she smiled gently and said, “This isn’t an ordinary pocket watch.”

She reached over and pressed up on what James had assumed was a thick base. But there was a hidden hinge, and when that was flipped up, it revealed a second clock face hidden beneath the first one. This one was set for five hours later. Rose-time, he realized with awe.

“Your great-great-grandfather was a watchmaker,” his mum said. “When his daughter realized she had a soulmate that lived half way across the world, he designed this watch for her. It’s been passed down each generation, and your father and I thought it was time you had it. We can’t get you closer to Rose yet, but we can at least try and make it easier to know when to talk with her, so you aren’t having to mentally keep track of her time as well as yours.”

“Thanks, Mum,” he said earnestly, wrapping his arm around her waist.

“You’re welcome, sweetheart,” she whispered, pressing her lips to his forehead.

James went to bed shortly after, not particularly tired, but not really wanting to do anything. He scrawled his familiar good morning message to Rose and slipped beneath his sheets.

After a few restless hours, he deemed he slept long enough, and he rolled over for a pen, content with chatting with Rose until his parents got up.

Morning, James!

He smiled, and consulted the time with his new pocket watch: 6:15am, his time, 11:15am, Rose’s time. He sighed. Sleeping felt like such a waste when he could be doing more important things, like talking to Rose. His heart ached with the thought that in just a few months, there would be an even bigger time gap between them.

“Morning,” he wrote.

You’re up early, she noted, and he had to smile. She was so observant.

“Couldn’t sleep,” he said, then he paused. “Got a bit of news last night. Turns out, I won’t be in Scotland in the fall. Mum and Dad accepted a different job in California.”

Oh. Where’s that?

James drew a rough—very rough—sketch of the United States on his forearm. He circled the top right part of the country. “This is Boston, where I am now.” He then put an X on the left edge of the country. “This is California. I’ll be even further away than I am now. It’s an 8-hour time difference instead of 5.”

Oh. That’s okay! I like that you travel a lot. I wish I could travel, but mummy doesn’t have the money for that. So I like hearing about it from you.

James stared at his arm. Rose was accepting this much more graciously than he had, and she had chosen to focus on the positives of this, rather than dwell on the negative, like he had. He smiled; she must be his soulmate if she was able to look past what he had gotten hung up on.

It was so difficult not to write down those three little words he’d been wanting to say when he first met her, but he wasn’t sure she was ready to hear them. Or if she wanted to hear them. Six year olds weren’t exactly looking for love.

So he instead said, “I didn’t think of it like that. Thank you, Rose.”
“For focusing on the positives, and for making me feel better,” he said.

Well, yeah. You’re my soulmate. I don’t like it when you’re sad.

There were those three words again, right on the tip of his tongue and at the tip of his pen.

“Still, thank you,” he wrote, “for making me better.”
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Wherein they celebrate James's birthday and we get a bit more time with James and his family.

The summer holiday finally arrived, and as promised, James and his parents went back to their home in Scotland.

However, after only two weeks, his dad came to him and told him that he would be flying ahead to get their home ready for James and his mother. They usually all helped move, and James felt guilty that his dad was doing it all himself, but both of his parents assured him that they didn’t mind and that they wanted him to enjoy his summer with Rose.

“And if all goes well, I’ll have a surprise ready for you when you get there,” his dad said, booping him on the nose as he and his mum walked with him to the security gates.

“What kind of surprise?”

“If I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise, now would it?” he teased.

“If you tell me, I’ll still act surprised,” James said through a grin.

Robert opened his arms for his son, holding him a little closer and a little tighter as he tried to memorize the feel and smell of him. James was growing like a weed and it would be more than a month until he saw his son again.

“Love you, mate,” he whispered into James’s ear, before he released his son and turned towards his wife.

He could see her reluctance, even after they both agreed this was the best way to handle it. He didn’t want to be separated from his soulmate any more than she did, but it was only a month and a half. They could survive that.

“I’ll miss you,” he murmured into her hair as she held her close.

She held him just as tightly as she pressed little kisses to his neck. He turned his head to catch her lips in his as he committed the taste and texture of her lips to memory.

James, meanwhile, turned away to give his parents some modicum of privacy. They were so in love and when it wasn’t sickening, it was beautiful. He found he had a much better appreciation for his parents’ relationship now that he had a soulmate of his own, and he found himself not for the first time wishing he and Rose were adults so that he could finally meet her in person.

James turned back around when the soft suckling noises of their kissing stopped, but they still hadn’t left each other’s arms. His dad’s forehead was pressed to his mum’s as they slowly nuzzled their noses together.

“I love you, Robert,” she whispered.
“I love you too, Vera.”

James once more felt guilty that he was the reason his parents were going to be separated, but then his dad pulled away and flashed them both a cheery grin and a “See you in seven weeks!” as he walked away and towards airport security.

They watched him until he was lost around a corner. His mum let out a soft sigh, but then she smiled at James and said, “I’m feeling a bit peckish. Lunch?”

James took advantage of his time with Rose, knowing that by the end of July, he would be in California. He had eventually fallen into sync with Rose’s sleeping schedule, despite her insanely early bedtime and wake-up time, so that sleep wouldn’t be an obstacle between them.

But all too soon, it was time for the Big Move. James was torn; he had really missed his dad, but he would really miss Rose and the ease with which they could talk to each other.

James sat beside his mum on the plane and rolled up his sleeves, intent on continuing his conversation with Rose, and he startled when he saw his mum was doing the same thing. Silly as it was, sometimes James forgot that his parents could still write to each other on their arms despite them having been married for almost twenty years.

“Tell Dad I said hi,” he said, and his mum smiled at him before writing the sentiment on her arm.

They both watched for a few seconds until Hey there, mate! Can’t wait to see you! appeared.

“Do you and Dad still write to each other regularly on your arms?” he asked, wondering why he had never asked before.

“Oh, sure,” his mum answered. “Not as often as we’d done before we met, but yeah, we’ll still write to each other. Sometimes it’s for more practical purposes, to remind each other about appointments or to pick up milk on the way home. Sometimes it’s more personal.”

James nodded at his arms, where Rose had already made her next move in Hangman. He sighed a little as he drew a torso on the stickman.

“I just…” he said. “I sometimes wish Rose wasn’t so little. I love her, and I’m so happy to be her soulmate, but… Sometimes I feel like we have nothing in common because I’m so much older than she is. Does that make me a bad soulmate?”

“Oh, no, sweetheart, no,” his mum said, taking his hand in hers and giving it a reassuring squeeze. “No, James, it doesn’t. It’s natural to want to connect with her more, but you’re both limited by your age gap. I’m sure there are days when she wishes you were her age, or wishes she was your age. But you’re both trying your best, and you obviously love each other already, and that’s the important thing.”

“You think she feels that way, too?” he asked, hoping his mum was right.

“Yes,” she said firmly, wanting her son to be confident that his soulmate is just as mad about him as he is about her. “And I also think she just won.”

James looked down at his arm and grinned when he saw she had filled in the rest of the letters to make the word ‘airplane’.
They passed the rest of the flight in a similar fashion, at least until Rose went to bed.

By the time they had reached their layover in New York, James was restless and tired of traveling, and he was exhausted. Luckily, he managed to nap through most of the flight to San Francisco, and before too long, he was tugging his mum to the baggage claim, where his dad said he’d meet them.

“Dad!” James shouted when he finally saw him.

His dad turned in a quick circle, glancing around rapidly as he looked for the source of the yell. They finally locked eyes and his dad’s face brightened into a smile as he began rushing towards his family.

James sprinted into his dad’s waiting arms.

“Oh, I’ve missed you!” his dad said, giving James’s ribs a tight squeeze. He pulled back from the embrace slightly to look James up and down. “Blimey, you must’ve grown a foot since I’ve seen you!”

“Takes after his father.”

His dad smiled softly over the top of James’s head, and James ducked away so his parents could reunite. He turned away from their soft words and kisses to look for their luggage.

His parents joined him a couple minutes later, holding hands and giggling to each other.

They finally got their luggage and his dad guided them to their car.

James took in the scenery as his dad drove; it was so different from Boston and Scotland, but beautiful in its own right.

After about a half hour, the car slowed to a stop in front of a high, arched gate. His dad reached out the window and typed in a few numbers on the control box, and the gates slowly swung open. James gawped at the large houses with pristine lawns, the couples out on a late evening walk, and the few straggling kids wrapping up the games they were playing in the streets.

“Here we are,” his dad said after a few minutes.

James glanced out at the house. It was a little smaller than the houses they’ve passed, but James still thought it was more than enough room for the three of them. He guiltily thought of Rose, and the small council flat she told him she shared with her mum.

His dad offered to give them a tour, but James didn’t particularly care for one. A house was a house; he’d catch up on the details of it later. Right now, all he wanted was a shower and a bed. His mum seemed to catch on to his desire, because she leaned up and whispered something into his dad’s ear.

“All right then, ready for your surprise?” his dad asked, walking away from the master bedroom and gesturing to the flight of stairs. “If you don’t like it, we can redo it to whatever you want. I just thought this might be a nice surprise for you, y’know…”

“Robert,” his mum interrupted softly, “how about we let James see it first?”

His dad’s ears pinkened, and James was even more excited to see what his dad had done for him.

He took the stairs two at a time, and gasped when he saw the door of Moria waiting for him. His dad had painted the slender, graceful arches along the wall next to the door frame, with the tree branches winding together across the actual door. James gaped at the intricate painting; it was perfect in every
“Dad, this is brilliant!” he breathed, turning around to face his parents.

“There’s more inside,” his dad urged, nodding towards the ajar door.

James wheeled around in eagerness, and pushed open the door. His jaw slackened as he entered the room. It was spacious, with light cream carpet that accented the slate grey walls nicely, but James wasn’t interested in the color scheme. He walked up to a wall and hovered his fingertips across a detailed map of Middle Earth that his dad had drawn for him in light silver paint.

The map sprawled across an entire wall, and he followed it along to the next wall, where the emblem of Gondor was painted in silver.

The third wall was the wall with the window, and framing the window on all sides were the Riddles in the Dark.

And on the final wall, above his bed’s headboard, was the inscription of the One Ring in elegant, flowing script.

“This is more than brilliant,” he whispered, slowly moving from wall to wall and admiring his dad’s work. How much time his dad must’ve put into the project, just to make James feel more at home in this new house. “Dad, this is fantastic! Thank you!”

He finally turned from the walls to give his dad a hug, feeling so loved and so happy.

“I’m glad you like it, mate,” his dad said.

“I really, really do,” James said earnestly, grinning as he spun around the room again to admire the walls. “This is the best surprise ever!”

His parents offered to order take-out for dinner, but James told them that he was knackered, and that he just wanted to take a shower and go to bed. Truthfully, he really was exhausted, but he also saw how much his parents wanted to be left alone to more thoroughly reunite.

So they bade him goodnight and went back downstairs, leaving James to explore his room. After the initial giddy surprise had worn off, James started to notice the smaller details of his room, like the six succulents planted into the backs of ceramic Bulbasaurus, the ornate oak bookcase and matching dresser and desk, the winding vines carved on his bedpost that helped keep the ambiance of Middle Earth, the softness of the lamps his dad had chosen. He loved his room so much, and he thought himself the luckiest boy in the world.

He couldn’t seem to stop grinning at the magnificence of the room and at his dad’s creative talents. He and Rose would get along so well once they were finally able to meet. His two favorite artists.

James looked at his watch, wanting to tell Rose all about the brilliant bedroom his dad had made him, but it was still the middle of the night for Rose.

After a hasty shower, James threw on a pair of pants and a cotton shirt and wrote a good morning message for Rose before he collapsed into bed and immediately fell asleep.

oOoOo

James really loved his new school; it was a little bigger than the one he had attended in Boston, and people didn’t automatically seem to hate him from the start. He had even made a few friends.
Though despite James’s attempts, nearly everyone at school knew within the first week that he was soulbound. He should’ve known better; the times when both he and Rose were awake were maddeningly short, and he wrote to her whenever he could, including during school hours, and people realized right away what he was doing.

Most of the students were accepting of it, and many of the students thought it was sweet, but there was a group of kids that mocked him and teased him about the ink on his arms and how he was so obsessed with having a soulmate when she was just a little kid. He ignored them as best he could. How could he be ashamed or embarrassed of Rose?

It was a little difficult to keep some of the boys from grabbing his arms and drawing lewd things on his skin, and every time it happened, he was quick to scribble out or wash off their drawings or curse words before Rose could see.

She asked why he scribbled on his arms so much, and he told her that some kids were just rude and didn’t understand their relationship.

*Do you want me to stop writing to you so much?*

His stomach flipped over. “No! Why?!” Talking to Rose was the highlight of his day, he couldn’t imagine not having her to talk to.

*Dunno. Might make it easier for you.*

“Rose, please don’t ever stop talking to me,” he begged.

*Okay, I won’t. As long as you never stop talking to me.*

He smiled in relief at his arm. “Deal.”

oOoOo

James and Rose quickly fell into a new routine. James got used to California and found he really liked the area. Rose loved when he told her about the different cities and landscapes; it was like second-hand travelling, and she was so happy that she had a soulmate that could help sate her wanderlust.

The weather started getting colder again. Well, for Rose. James was thrilled about the temperate climate he now lived in; a winter in Boston had been enough to turn him away from snow and ice for the foreseeable future.

When October finally came, and the rest of the world was getting hyped for Halloween, Rose was only growing more and more anxious. James’s birthday was coming up, and she had no idea what to do. He had sent her the most beautiful flowers and the sweetest card, and she wanted to do something special for him, but she didn’t know what. Or how.

Her mum had been disappointingly unhelpful, and as the twenty-seventh drew nearer, Rose grew more and more frantic until she finally accepted the fact that she wouldn’t be able to do anything for James for his birthday. The realization broke her heart and made her feel guilty that James got stuck with someone like her as a soulmate.

With two weeks to go until James’s twelfth birthday, Jackie dropped Rose off at Mickey’s Gran’s house for the day while she ran errands. Mickey busied himself with video games, and Rose watched and brooded, until his Gran asked for her help in the kitchen
“Spit it out, then,” Rita-Anne demanded as soon as she had Rose alone.

“What?”

“You’ve been moping about something,” she said shortly. “Jackie still giving you a hard time about James?”

“A little,” Rose admitted. “I don’t really talk to her about James anymore.”

Rita-Anne huffed impatiently, muttering under her breath about the stubbornness of people.

“James’s birthday is coming up,” Rose said quietly, “and I don’t know what to do. He sent me such pretty flowers and wrote a pretty card. But I don’t have money to do anything for him.”

“What makes you think you have to spend money on that boy?”

“Because I want to do something nice for him!” Rose almost shouted, so tired of hearing everyone around her berate her for her love of James.

Rita-Anne chuckled and said, “You misunderstood, Rose; I meant that there is no reason you can’t simply make something for James. I’m sure he understands that money is tight for you and your mother. And from what you’ve told me of that boy, I’m sure he would be just as happy, if not happier, with something handmade from you than something bought in any store.”

Rose smiled in understanding.

“C’mon,” Rita-Anne said, gesturing for Rose to follow as she slowly navigated her way down the hall. “I think I’ve got some nicer paper lying around that you can have.”

With the thicker paper Mickey’s Gran had given her, Rose worked for a week on a drawing for James.

He’d told her a few months ago that he had always wanted a dog, a pet he could run around with and cuddle with, but because he and his family moved around so much, his parents had never been able to give him such a pet.

So Rose decided to make one for him. She carefully sketched out the dog’s shaggy fur and its happy, droopy face, before she started working on the boy that was supposed to be James. But she had no idea what he looked like other than that he was tall, skinny, and had brown hair.

Rose shrugged as she continued drawing, giving the boy a shock of messy hair that somewhat mirrored the dog’s.

She nearly gave up half way through, though, thinking this was the stupidest idea ever and James probably hated being stuck with a girl half his age who couldn’t even send him a simple gift. Or draw him a half-way decent picture. Rose had tearfully turned away from the drawing for a few hours, and was just about to bin the entire thing, when James wrote to her and said, “I can’t wait to see what you’re making me! I’m sure it’s brilliant!”

Rose was now determined to finish this for him, even if it didn’t look as good as she wanted it to. He deserved to get something from her on his birthday.

The next time Rose went to Mickey’s house, she brought along her drawing and the letter she had written to James.
Rite-Anne gave her an envelope and stamps and helped her address the letter. Rose didn’t understand the details when James said that she could mail the gift to his address in Scotland and he would eventually get it in San Francisco. But Rose trusted him, and she addressed it to Scotland and added the appropriate postage.

The following week, James wrote, *I think your gift came!*

“Don’t open it til your birthday!” Rose warned.

*But that’s ages away!*

Rose giggled; James could be so dramatic at times.

“It’s in two days!”

*Can you give me a hint?*

“Nope,” Rose wrote.

*Aww, you’re not being fair!*

“It’s nothing exciting.”

*Sure it is, James argued. It’s a gift from you. That’s definitely something to get excited about.*

His genuine enthusiasm finally calmed her nerves, but when the fateful day arrived and he could finally open it, they came back. Rose was jittery all day as she waited for it to be mid-afternoon when James would be getting up.

*Oh, Rose this is beautiful! Thank you so much! I love it!*

Rose smiled at her arm, relieved that James liked his gift. Or was he just saying he liked it, so he didn’t hurt her feelings?

“You do?” she asked worriedly.

*Oh yes! I mean, you’ve made the boy far too handsome, but I appreciate it! An excellent boost to my ego! And Pavlov is hanging proudly on my wall in the Shire.*

“Pavlov?” Rose wrinkled her nose. That was an odd name for a dog; if it were up to her, she’d’ve named him Spot, or Rex.

*He was a psychologist who did experiments on dogs.*

“Experiments on dogs?!!”

*Nothing bad! James quickly assured. Some behavior studies, that’s all.*

“So you like it?” Rose confirmed, still not convinced that James wasn’t just being nice.

*I really do. It’s the best birthday gift I could’ve asked for, because it came from my soulmate.*

Rose grinned stupidly at her arm, as she always did when he called her his soulmate, and she wondered if he smiled like that when she called him her soulmate.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Wherein James and Rose celebrate Christmas and their anniversary.

James was giddy with excitement throughout the forever-long plane ride back to Scotland, where he and his family were due to spent the Christmas holidays. It was only for three weeks, but he would take more Rose time whenever and however he could get it.

When they arrived back at their house, the housekeepers had cleaned, stocked the fridges, and had brought out all of the boxes of Christmas decorations. For the next few days, they worked on deck ing the halls of the manor, making it as festive as possible.

The smell of pine, cinnamon, and baked goods was a constant in their home, and James loved it. But as excited as he was about the holiday, he still felt a little empty inside. He wished Rose could be there to celebrate with them.

“I wish we could just invite Rose and her mum over for Christmas dinner,” James whined over dinner, and not for the first time, as he buried his pile of uneaten peas under his cold mashed potatoes. “They don’t live *that* far away!”

“James, you know it’s taboo to meet your soulmate before you’re both eighteen,” his dad reminded.

“Taboo shmaboo,” James muttered petulantly, pulling a soft snort of laughter from his parents.

“Besides, from what you’ve said, Rose’s mum still hasn’t warmed to the idea that her daughter has a soulmate,” his mum said gently.

“It’s been a year!” James exclaimed.

“Try and think about it from her perspective, sweetheart,” his mum said. “Her daughter was just five years old when suddenly she realized that there was someone out there, a total stranger, destined for her child. Any parent would be a little wary. And a little sad. There is suddenly a new person in their child’s life that is just as important to them.”

James gaped for a minute, his fork hanging loosely from his fingers.

“How do you feel about this?” he demanded, reeling from the possibility that maybe his parents hadn’t been as thrilled about Rose as he had been.

“A bit, at first,” his mum admitted, and his dad shrugged apologetically beside her.

He felt an irrational anger at his parents that they would be upset over the more wonderful thing that had ever happened to him. He glared at his plate as he pulverized the potatoes.

“But I know she makes you so happy,” his mum continued, “so it makes it easier to be happy for you. I know the joy in having a soulmate, and I’m so glad you can experience it too. And James, you know your father and I love Rose, right? And that we’re so happy for the two of you?”
Suddenly his irritation was gone.

“Yeah,” he said, finally setting his fork down. “I just… I want Rose to be eighteen already. I want to meet her in person.”

“I’ll happen,” his mum assured. “Just be patient, darling.”

Patience, in James’s opinion, was overrated. He saw how happy and in love his parents were, and he desperately craved that intimacy with Rose. But she was still so young, and probably didn’t even think of him as anything more than a really good friend.

He sighed and went to his room as he tried not to keep a running mental tab of how many days he would have to endure until Rose was finally old enough to meet in person.

oOoOo

The next week was spent getting last-minute shopping done. He and his parents spent the better part of the afternoon perusing the mall.

“I still need to get something for Rose,” James said, thumbing behind towards the shops. “Can I meet you somewhere in an hour?”

At his parents’ nod and establishment of a rendezvous time and location, he wandered away from them and into the bowels of the mall. He knew exactly what he wanted to get Rose.

He quickly found a map and oriented himself in the direction of the arts and crafts department. Though once he was there, he was nearly overwhelmed by the selection. There were so many different types of paper alone. He wandered helplessly through the aisles, until an elderly gentleman approached him.

“Can I help you, son?”

“Er, maybe?” James asked, scratching the back of his neck. “I never knew there was such variety in art supplies.”

“Well, maybe I can help narrow it down for you?” he suggested. “Tell me, is this for you or for someone else?”

“For Rose,” he said automatically, before blushing when he realized the world at large didn’t know who ‘Rose’ was. “Ehm, my-my soulmate. It’s Christmas.”

James cringed again when he realized his blunder.

It’s Christmas.
Of course it’s bloody Christmas!

But the old man grinned down at James good-naturedly.

“So it is,” he said. “What sort of supplies were you hoping to get for your Rose?”

James smiled sheepishly and shrugged.

“She really likes to draw,” he explained. “So I thought I’d get her stuff to draw with. But I don’t know what specifically to get. I mean, she’s only six, so she doesn’t need anything too fancy. Not that she doesn’t deserve something fancy! Oh, bollocks.”

James felt like an utter idiot as he scrubbed his hands over his surely red face. But the old man said, “I understand what you meant, son. And I think I know what you’re looking for.”

The old man guided him to an aisle of simple supplies.
“I’d start here,” he suggested. “It’s not as pricey as the rest of the store, but the quality is still good. This will have all the basics you’ll need, and are good start-up materials. Take a look around; I’ll be up at the counter if you need any more assistance.”

James thanked the man, and started perusing the aisle, getting distracted by the various pieces of art hanging along the walls as well as comparing ingredients across different brands of paint.

His hour quickly dwindled, but by the end of it, James was finally satisfied with his armful of supplies as he walked to the checkout counter.

“That’s £23.87,” the old man said, and James’s heart fell when he pulled out a crumpled £20 note.

“Er,” he said, patting his pockets as he scanned the items for one he could put back.

But the old man accepted his £20 note with a wink, and said, “Merry Christmas, son. I hope your Rose enjoys her gift.”

James accepted the bags wordlessly, before he stuttered out a few words of thanks and rushed out of the shop and towards the little restaurant he said he would meet his parents at.

He saw them both pacing outside the eatery. He jogged towards them and finally met his mum’s gaze. Her shoulders relaxed, and he immediately felt guilty that he had worried them.

“Sorry, took longer than I thought,” he explained, hefting up the bag of Rose’s gift. “Who knew art shops had so much variety.”

“Did you find what you were looking for?” his dad asked, placing his hand on James’s and Vera’s backs to guide them into the restaurant.

“Oh, yeah,” James said. “I think she’ll really like it.”

oOoOo

Rose knew she was driving her mum mad with how often she was talking with James as soon as he was back home. Jackie was trying to get them into the Christmas spirit by baking cookies and decorating their flat and wandering around the shops in town, even though they rarely bought anything.

Rose went to Mickey’s Gran again and sheepishly asked her for a few more pieces of nice paper so she could draw something for James again. She hoped he wouldn’t be too disappointed that these were the only gifts she could give him, but after his enthusiastic reception of his birthday gift, she thought he would like it.

She decided to make him a series of Christmas drawings, mostly of the decorations around the flat: their little tree with its lights and ornaments, the two stockings hanging on the wall, the table laden with freshly-baked cookies, and a few rough renditions of scenes from her favorite Christmas films.

Rita-Anne helped her postmark them again, even though Rose thought she remembered how to do it from October.

Rose was worried that they hadn’t arrived in time, but on Christmas Eve night, James asked her what she had sent him.

“You’ll see tomorrow,” she said. “Night James!”
Rose could hardly sleep. She loved Christmas morning, and this Christmas morning in particular was cause for greater excitement.

As soon as she woke up—far too early for her mum’s imposed acceptable wake-up time—Rose climbed out of bed and contented herself to wait on the sofa until her mum woke up. There were a few gifts under the tree in shiny wrapping paper, and Rose turned on the lights on the tree to watch everything glow red and green.

She grabbed her pens and started making a good morning/Merry Christmas doodle for James. She was just finishing up when she heard her mum’s bedroom door open. Rose set her pens down and ran down the hall.

“Merry Christmas, Mummy!”

“Oh, Merry Christmas, sweetheart,” Jackie murmured, kneeling down to catch Rose in a tight hug. “Let me get a cuppa, then you can start opening your presents.”

A few minutes later, with her tea in hand, Jackie sat in front of their tree and handed Rose the few gifts she had managed to buy for her daughter. She wanted so badly for Rose to have a good Christmas, and she had been saving all year just for this, but it still wasn’t as grand a Christmas as Jackie wanted for her daughter.

But Rose, bless her, was so happy with everything she got. It nearly broke Jackie’s heart to see her little girl so happy to receive new clothes and a few discount store toys.

Her gaze travelled to the large, bright red and gold wrapped gift that was still tucked behind the tree. A box had come for Jackie about a week ago, and when she opened it, she found the present and a note from James, telling Jackie that this was his gift to Rose and could she please make sure Rose didn’t open it until Christmas morning.

She could only imagine what that boy had gotten for Rose, and Jackie had to swallow the sudden sour taste in her mouth as she tried to be as excited about James as Rose was. It had been a year, and Jackie still was utterly baffled by the frankly disturbing connection between her little girl and a boy twice her age. What did a twelve-year-old want with her six-year-old anyway?

Jackie was pulled back from her deepening resentment by a hug from Rose.

“Thanks, Mummy!” she said happily. “This is the best Christmas yet!”

“Wait, darling, there’s one more gift,” Jackie said, reaching behind the tree for James’s gift.

Rose recognized James’s handwriting immediately, and she hastily tore through the wrapping paper.

“Oh,” she gasped when she finally opened the box.

She lifted out a thick sketch pad, and several boxes of colored pencils, pens, and markers.

An envelope was at the bottom of the box, and Rose once again recognized James’s sloppy scrawl. She pulled out a thick Christmas card, and held it in shaking hands as her eyes raked over the three people in the photograph on the front.

A young man and woman were standing side by side with their arms around each other’s waists. The woman’s head was tucked into the crook of the man’s shoulder, and the man’s cheek was leaning against the woman’s hair. They both had a hand on a shoulder of the young boy standing in front of them. He was the most beautiful boy Rose had ever seen. Everyone in the photo was beautiful, and
they looked so happy that Rose’s chest felt tight with an emotion she couldn’t quite put a name to. She traced her fingertip across the boy’s freckled face, thinking she had never seen a more joyful smile.

“Is that himself, then?” Jackie asked, peering over Rose’s shoulder at the family in the photograph.

“Yeah,” Rose whispered, rubbing her thumb over the words *Merry Christmas from the McCrimmons!* “He’s so pretty.”

Jackie harrumphed, scanning a critical eye over the family and their nice clothes and the brick fireplace behind them and the surely expensive diamond ring on James’s mum’s finger.

“Bunch of hoity-toity professors, if you ask me,” she grumbled. “Think they’re better than the rest of us.”

“No they don’t!” Rose protested. “They’re lovely people!”

“How would you know?” Jackie challenged. “Just look at ‘em. Probably think we’re a charity case or something. Well let me tell you, we can get on quite fine on our own!”

Jackie stood up and turned back to the kitchen, and Rose had to bite her lip to keep from crying. Why couldn’t her mum love James like she did?

Rose swiped at her nose, then picked up James’s card again. Seeing him like this really made it blatantly obvious that she and James came from very different backgrounds. She wondered if somehow their soulmarks had gotten all mixed up. Maybe James was supposed to be matched with someone more like him, someone closer to his own age, someone as clever as him.

But when she looked at her arm, she saw some new ink around her drawing. James had added snowflakes and a string of Christmas lights, and had written *Good morning, Rose, and Merry Christmas! I hope you’re having a wonderful holiday!*

On their clean right forearm, he had then written, *You are such a fantastic artist, Rose! I mean that! One of the best I’ve seen. You possess a very special talent. Thank you for sharing it with me. This is definitely the best gift this Christmas. So what about you? Get many good gifts?*

Rose smiled at her arm, knowing James was really asking if she had liked the gift he had gotten her. She cast a glance into the kitchen, but her mum was busy fixing up more tea and some breakfast, so Rose plopped on the couch with her pen, and tried to think of the words that could possibly explain even a fraction of how grateful she was for her art supplies, and how much she cherished seeing a photograph of him and his parents.

Rose talked with James on and off all day, ignoring her mother’s disapproval, until finally Mickey and his Gran arrived for Christmas dinner.

“Come see what James sent me!” Rose exclaimed as soon as Rita-Anne and Mickey entered the small flat.

Jackie shook her head at Rose’s enthusiasm, earning her a glare from the older woman.

Rita-Anne followed Rose to the living room, and patiently watched as Rose shoved the box of art supplies into her hands.

“Oh, look at that!” Rita-Anne gushed. She put on her glasses and picked up all of the writing
implements and held them to the light to get a better look. “That boy must’ve bought all the pens in Britain!”

“And look!”

Rita-Anne accepted the card Rose thrust at her, and smiled softly when she saw the beaming family of three on the front.

“So this is your James.”

Rose was bouncing on her toes as she rushed up beside Rita-Anne to stare at the card some more, despite having looked at it on and off all day.

“Yes,” Rose whispered softly.

“He’s quite handsome,” Rita-Anne said, giving the photograph back to Rose. “And he is one lucky boy.”

“You think?” Rose asked.

“Yes,” Rita-Anne said firmly. “Never doubt that, Rose. And never ever put yourself down.” She pressed a quick kiss to the side of Rose’s head. “You and Mickey entertain yourselves, now. I’m going to help your mother in the kitchen. I want a word with her…”

Rose quickly became aware that the anniversary of the day she met James was soon approaching. She could hardly believe it had been a year. Some days, it still felt new and surreal; other days, it felt like she had known James her whole life. He was her best friend, and she loved him so much; she couldn’t imagine her life without him, and she knew that fact didn’t sit well with her mum.

But she couldn’t very well ignore the date, and so for the next few days leading up to the New Year, Rose studied the photograph of James and his parents very carefully, determined to get all of the details right so she could recreate it in a drawing for him.

She spent ages debating the colored pencil to use to color James’s eyes, and finally decided that two shades of brown blended together seemed to do the trick. And that the same shade seemed to match his hair well.

It took nearly three days of non-stop drawing (much to Jackie’s annoyance), but finally Rose was satisfied with it, and eager to mail it to James.

She folded it carefully, trying to keep the creases as far away from the actual drawing as possible, and tucked it, the letter she had written him, and a photo of her and her mum—taken from her mum’s wallet—into one of the envelopes Rita-Anne had given her. She put what she hoped was the correct postage onto the envelope and carefully wrote out the address she had memorized.

James received it on New Year’s Eve, but Rose asked him not to open it until the next day.

“It’s an anniversary surprise,” Rose said, wondering if James would think it silly.

Of course she should’ve known that James never thought anything she said was silly.

I didn’t get you anything!

“It’s okay,” she said earnestly. “The art supplies were perfect!”
James wouldn’t be dissuaded, despite Rose’s insistence that he didn’t need to get her anything. He admitted to her that the gift he finally settled on was a little selfish on his part. Rose did her best to assure him that she would love it, regardless.

Finally, the morning of the first of January dawned, and Rose was up bright and early. She had tried to stay up until midnight with her mum and all of the other partygoers in their flat, but she had crashed on the sofa at ten o’clock and vaguely remembered her mum carrying her to her room.

When Rose glanced at her arms, a giddy grin crossed her face.

Happy Anniversary, my Rose!

Rose felt an odd thrill of joy at the ‘my’, and she bit her lip as a giggle bubbled up inside her. She was someone’s soulmate. Just as someone was hers. They were each other’s, in every sense of the word, and even though it had been a year, that fact still amazed her.

“Happy anniversary, my James!” she wrote happily.

He replied almost instantly.

Can I open my gift now??

“Yes!” she said, surprised he hadn’t opened it already, impatient as he was.

Rose watched her arm excitedly, waiting for his reaction. She hoped he liked it.

Oh, Rose! This is fantastic! Absolutely perfect! This is the most wonderful drawing I have ever seen. You are brilliantly talented, my Rose. Thank you so much.

Rose bounced on her bed, overjoyed he liked her drawing.

Ooh, there’s more!

Rose waited with bated breath, wondering what he would think of her. Glancing at his photograph taped to her wall, she became painfully aware of just how much older he was and how well off he and his family were compared to her and her mum.

Is this—

He stopped writing, and Rose wanted to bury herself under the blankets of her bed. It was such a bad idea, sending James a photograph. Her mum had been right…

Rose, oh, my Rose, you’re beautiful! So beautiful! You’re the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen.

Rose’s cheeks heated at his high praise. Surely he didn’t mean all that, but Rose liked to think he did.

So she accepted his gracious compliments with a smile, and continued celebrating her anniversary with her soulmate.

James’s anniversary gift to her came a few days later. She opened the box and saw a bunch of envelopes in all different sizes and a large pack of postage stamps.

“Thanks for the gift,” Rose said, even though she was a little confused by it.
You’re welcome! Remember when I said my gift was a little selfish? I thought you could maybe use the envelopes to send me more of your art. I’d love to see anything you draw. You’re a wonderful artist. And I figured it would be easier if you had a set of envelopes and stamps of your own. Stamps can get a little expensive. But if you’d rather use the envelopes and stamps for something else, that’s okay too.

Rose’s chest felt warm with happiness that not only did James seem to like her art, but he was encouraging her to draw more and send him her drawings.

Oh, how she wished she could tell him how much that meant to her; her mum still thought it was a waste of time because she would never be able to make a living off of it. Her mum just didn’t understand that drawing was fun for Rose.

Those three words were right on the tip of Rose’s tongue, but she wasn’t sure if James thought of her like that. A twelve-year-old probably didn’t want to hear that a six-year-old loved him. But she did love him. She really, really did.

So she instead wrote, “Thank you, James! I love that you’re my soulmate.”

Oh, Rose, I love that you’re my soulmate, too.

Rose smiled shyly at her arm. Maybe James understood what she had really meant.

I love it more than you’ll ever know.

And maybe he was trying to tell her too.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Wherein I try to cram five years into one chapter.

After the holidays had passed, James’s parents were giving him not-so-subtle reminders that they needed to know if he wanted to be back in Scotland next school year.

For weeks, he went back and forth, keeping a running list of pros and cons in his head until he finally admitted that he really liked California. This breathed a sigh of relief into his parents—well, his mum—who really wanted to stay to continue the research she had just started, and they were also so glad that James wasn’t as miserable as he had anticipated.

But James also felt exceedingly guilty. He had told Rose that his stay in California would be a temporary one, and now here he was, trying to figure out how to tell her that not only would he be staying in California for the foreseeable future, but that it was a voluntary decision. He loved his new school and his new friends, and he loved the area so much. But he missed Rose, too, and he hated that he was so selfish as to keep them separated by an eight-hour time difference.

He felt guilty for weeks as he tried to figure out a way to tell Rose that he wasn’t going to be leaving the West Coast any time soon. But he didn’t know how to tell her, so he just didn’t, figuring it would come out eventually. Or maybe she’d realize on her own.

But then his Dad sat him down at dinner one night as his mum was working late and told him that he needed to tell Rose explicitly. She deserved to know.

“You should never be afraid of telling your soulmate something,” his dad said. “And avoiding telling her is deception, which also isn’t good. Any solid relationship is built on mutual trust and respect. Building that trust takes time, James, and it’s so easy for it be broken. Even between soulmates. The easiest way to build it and keep it is to be open and honest with each other from the start. Or else you’ll both get into bad habits and it will cause you both a lot of heartache.”

James had to admit his dad was right (oh, who was he kidding? His dad was always right), and he told Rose that night, hoping she wouldn’t be too upset with him.

“It’s okay. I understand. But I wish you didn’t have to. I miss you.”

“Oh, yes! I love talking to you.

“And James, I love that you’re so happy. It makes me happy too.”

When Rose’s seventh birthday came, James managed to surprise her with a delivery of seven dark
red roses, and the card “seven perfect roses for my perfect Rose on her seventh birthday. Love, James.”

Rose grinned at the card, particularly at the sentiment. *Love, James.* This was the first time he had ever used that word in direct regards to her, and it sent a thrill of happiness through her.

Rose was giddy with delight, and even after the flowers withered, she put the vase and the card on a shelf in her bedroom beside last year’s vase and card, along with a polaroid photograph her mum had grudgingly taken of her holding the vase of roses.

When James’s birthday eventually arrived, it came with more Rose drawings. He eagerly ripped open the envelope and pulled out a few sheets of thick paper, a card, and a photograph. He looked at the photograph first, eager to see if it was another photo of his precious Rose.

It was.

He held the polaroid in his hands as though it were the most delicate thing in the world as he looked at the beaming face of his soulmate, who was holding up a vase of dark burgundy roses. The ones he sent, he realized, and his gut clenched at the happiness on Rose’s face, and the knowledge that he put it there. God, she was beautiful. There had never been a more beautiful girl in existence, and James was smugly proud that he had the most gorgeous soulmate on the planet.

He then grabbed the pictures she’d drawn next. The first was a rendition of the very same flowers in the photograph still tucked in James’s left hand. They were gorgeous, and James marveled at Rose’s skill, which seemed to improve every time she sent him a new drawing. The shading of the flower’s petals looked so soft and real, and James was so proud of his soulmate.

The next picture was of a tree with its leaves half fallen off. The one thing he disliked about San Francisco was its lack of seasons. It had been two years since he had seen a proper autumn (nothing could beat the New England autumn, in his opinion), and he missed it. He missed the cooling temperatures and the clear skies and the smell of dying leaves and the warm, cozy jumpers. And most of all the colors, which Rose gave him in this drawing.

He remembered complaining to Rose about a month or so ago when pumpkin-flavored everything exploded around him, and he whined that it didn’t feel like autumn, so why was everyone obsessed with pumpkin. So he couldn’t help but laugh when he looked at her card: on the front, Rose had drawn a row of pumpkins, a pumpkin pie, and a steaming mug with the word *pumpkin* scrawled across it.

Still chuckling, he opened the card:

*Happy Birthday, my James! I hope you enjoy the pictures, and the little bit of London autumn I could bring to you in California.*

*Love, Rose*

James grinned at the card, particularly at the sentiment. *Love, Rose.* This was the first time she had ever used that word in direct regards to him, and his stomach flipped in delight.

oOoOo

Christmas came once more, and with it a fresh batch of art supplies for Rose and new drawings for James to hang in the Shire (which was almost becoming too crowded), as well as new photographs of each other. James sent her his annual family Christmas card, which she taped to her wall beside last year’s, and Rose sent him a photograph of her and Rita-Anne baking cookies together.
Their anniversary came and went, and they marveled that it had been two years since they met.

Time seemed to paradoxically fly and drag, and before he knew it, James was about to begin high school.

The night before school started, James finally revealed to Rose how scared he was to start school. He was a year younger than most high school freshmen, thanks to having skipped past the first grade.

*James, you’ll be fine,* Rose assured. *You’ve already made loads of friends who will be moving up to the ninth grade with you. It’s not like they’ll stop being your friend just because you’re in a new school.*

“Hasn’t stopped it from happening before,” James admitted, his stomach aching at the memory of all the friends he had made and lost over the years, either due to his parents’ nomadic lifestyle or because those once-friends realized he wasn’t all that interesting after the novelty of having a new student who travels a lot wore off.

*Well, then they’re idiots who don’t deserve to have you call them your friend. And James, you know I’ll never leave you, right? You’re stuck with me forever.*

James’s heart fluttered in his chest, and he comforted himself in the knowledge that no matter what happened in his life, he would always have his Rose.

“I quite like the sound of that,” he told her happily. “Thank you, Rose.”

*You’re welcome. But shouldn’t you be asleep by now?*

“Probably,” he wrote. He’d been ready for bed for an hour now, but the nerves in his gut had kept him from falling asleep. “But I’m not quite sleepy yet. Can we keep talking for a little while longer?”

*Of course. What about?*

“Anything,” he said.

James ignored the jeering behind him as he walked with two of his friends to their advanced algebra class. As it always did, word spread like wildfire through the school that James was soulmated. Usually students at school didn’t care, but as soon as the kids realized that Rose was only eight years old, the teasing started up, calling him everything from a cradle-robber to more offensive and insulting things James tried to erase from his memory. It was more brutal this time around, because teenagers could be very cruel and lewd, and in a school of over three-thousand students, there was a statistically higher percentage of bullies.

James ignored them as best he could.

Until it was time for the school’s homecoming dance, which happened to be Sadie Hawkins style.

After turning down the fourth girl in as many days, he stormed off to the cafeteria for his lunch hour.

“I thought everyone knew I was soulmated!” he exploded, setting his tray down with more force than necessary. “Why are all of these girls asking me to the dance?!”

“Er, you do know that Rose is only a little kid, right?” one of Grace’s friends—Paul?—said.

“I’m quite aware of her age,” James said through gritted teeth.
“I don’t understand you,” Paul said on a laugh. “You’ve got all these chicks lining up, probably wanting and willing to fuck your brains out, and you’re saying no!”

James looked appalled as a French fry dropped from his fingers.

“You’re joking,” he said flatly, glaring at his friend. Well. His friend’s friend. He wasn’t all that fond of Paul, but he was pretty sure Grace was harboring a crush on him, so for her sake, he was playing nice.

“Not at all,” Paul said sincerely, glancing around the table as murmurs of agreement rippled around him. “Your girlfriend is too little to understand the hormones and sex drive of a teenage boy, let alone help you out with them. Why not have a bit of fun while you still can. Work off some of that frustration?”

Paul waggled his eyebrows as he made a few crude hand gestures, which only caused James’s temples to pound in anger.

“Rose is not my girlfriend,” James growled, shoving his chair away from the table and slinging his backpack over his shoulder. “She is my soulmate. And how dare you imply that I would—would play around with another girl, just because Rose is eight years old! Her age doesn’t matter! I don’t care that she’s five years younger than I am, because we have a connection. A deep and unbreakable connection that you half-wits couldn’t possibly understand or appreciate! There will never be anyone for me except Rose, which is how it should be between soulmates. She is the best part of me, and she loves me as I am, for who I am, and in her own way, and that is all I need!”

James was well aware he’d drawn the gaze of nearly everyone in the lunchroom, but at the moment, he didn’t give a damn. He roughly threw his untouched tray of food in the trash and stalked off towards the library to spend the rest of his lunch hour in peace.

James’s friend group dwindled after that lunch hour fiasco. Part of him was sad that he once again found himself more often on his own, while another part of him was convinced he had done the right thing. He didn’t want to hang around people who didn’t respect him and his relationship with Rose.

At least he still had Grace, who had been the first friend he had made when he moved to San Francisco, and he managed to find a new group of friends when he joined the after school chess team, quiz team, and robotics team.

James loved his new niche of friends, relieved that he wouldn’t have to endure all four years of high school with no one but bullies, and he found he quite liked high school more than he thought, which made the time pass a lot quicker than it would have otherwise…

…and before he knew it, he and Rose were celebrating their third anniversary, then their fourth.

“Four years to the day since my life was forever changed,” James wrote that morning. “Sometimes it feels like yesterday, other times it feels like I’ve known you forever. Thank you for existing, and for being the best soulmate anyone could ask for.”

They grew closer with every passing day, and more and more eager to meet face to face as they watched each other grow up into a more beautiful person every day.

Rose watched James grow from an awkward, gangly, nerdy pre-teen into a beautiful, graceful, lanky, and still nerdy teenager.

James watched Rose grow from a young child into a beautiful pre-teen. The changes seemed so incredibly drastic to him with every photograph as he watched her grow nearly a foot taller and lose
the lingering baby fat around her face.

Every time they received a new photograph of each other, they felt their hearts swell with more love and anticipation as they ticked yet another day off of their seemingly unending countdown to Rose’s eighteenth birthday.

Before they knew it, James was half way done with high school. Entering his junior year of high school brought with it the anxiety and excitement of beginning the college search, and James found he was eager to move on to this next phase in life. Partly because he was getting bored with high school, having gone through nearly all of the advanced placement courses the school offered, but mostly because it meant he was one step closer to finally meeting Rose.

God, he could hardly wait. He loved Rose so wholly and completely he could hardly believe that this was his life. When he was a little kid and imagining what it would be like to have a soulmate, he never once imagined this. His past self just couldn’t possible comprehend the enormity of emotions he felt whenever he spoke to Rose, or about Rose, or had a passing thought of her. She had completely consumed his entire being, and he would do absolutely anything for her.

He knew he was hopelessly in love with her, and he was confident (well, mostly confident) that she loved him. To what extent, he wasn’t sure, but he would take what he could get; it was more than enough to have Rose in his life because she understood him better than anyone ever could, and she made him so much better and wiser and kinder with every passing day. More than that, she made him want to become a better man, and if that wasn’t love, he wasn’t sure what was.

And he adored watching her love of art grow and evolve to encompass other creative outlets.

Shortly after her tenth birthday, Rose’s school began advertising after-school activities. She eagerly joined the after-school gymnastics and art lessons, and on a whim, piano lessons.

She quickly fell in love with the piano, and her instructor said she was a natural with it. Rose really loved her instructor, who was a retired musical therapist. He was also soulmated, and when he realized Rose wasn’t getting the emotional support from her mum, he took Rose under his wing to guide her and answer questions she had about soulmates.

He even helped her create a birthday gift for James.

The week before his sixteenth birthday, Rose warned him that he was getting a slightly different gift this year, but she hoped he liked it.

James was impatient for his gift now, wondering what Rose could’ve sent him if now more of her art, and hoping that she didn’t spend any money on him.

The package came for him three days before his birthday, and his parents had to hide it from him when they caught him opening the box containing his gift.

“Rose wants it to be for your birthday. You can wait a few days more,” his dad told him firmly when James mumbled under his breath that it was his gift from his soulmate.

Finally, the twenty-seventh dawned, and a small blue present was sitting at his spot at breakfast. He tore into it eagerly, and James pulled out a CD. His brow furrowed, until he remembered that Rose mentioned she had taken up music lessons.

He sprinted to his room and quickly put the disc into his CD player. The first piano strains of Happy
Birthday started up, causing James to grin happily at the music player. He lay down on his bed, content to listen to the rest of the CD.

She had recorded a half hour of music for him, ranging from simple excerpts of classical pieces to cheerful little ditties to familiar Disney tunes, and he loved it all.

Silence finally filled his room, and he was about to get up and restart the CD when a voice said, “I’m still just learning, but I hope you liked it. Happy Birthday, James.”

He froze on his bed, listening to the static from the speakers as the CD ended, before he jumped up and played the CD again, fast-forwarding to the very end.

“I’m still just learning, but I hope you liked it. Happy Birthday, James.”

Rewind.

“I’m still just learning, but I hope you liked it. Happy Birthday, James.”

Rewind.

“I’m still just learning, but I hope you liked it. Happy Birthday, James.”

A slow grin split his face as he listened to her beautiful voice, and the way his name sounded off her tongue. She had only spoken two short sentences, but it left him yearning for more. Now more than ever, he wished time would accelerate to a point in time where he could hear that voice every day.

Good luck today James!

James gnawed on the inside of his cheek as he bounced on his toes, checking and double checking his project one final time. Not that he could do anything now if he did find a problem, but it made him feel better to be doing something.

“I’m gonna be sick,” he wrote, feeling his stomach churn as he watched the judges thank the student to his left before turning to walk towards him.

No, you’re gonna be great! I know you will. You’ve been working on this project for ages. It’s so brilliant!

He forced himself to take a deep breath, bolstered by Rose’s unending confidence in him.

He exhaled heavily, and then grinned at the six men and women in suits who were staring at him expectantly.

“Hello,” he said. “I’m James McCrimmon, and this is my project. I was inspired by something that happened to me and my soulmate a few years ago. We’d only known each other for a few weeks, and then suddenly she stopped writing. Four days of silence later, she finally got a message to me saying she had broken her arm, so she couldn’t write to me.

“With these bionic hands, those four days could have been a lot less stressful.” James motioned towards the set of wire and metal hands on the table beside him. “Allow me to demonstrate.”

He took in another calming breath, feeling his heart hammering against his ribs, as he turned on the hands and their corresponding keyboards. A pen was already tucked into the fingers, and James angled the hands towards the pad of paper propped in front of them.
“With this,” James said, lifting up the keyboard, “I can write whatever I want. For example…”

He typed a short sentence and held his breath. He blew it out on a grin as the right hand started moving the pen, writing *Isn’t this so cool?*

He heard murmurs of appreciation from the judges, and he noticed with a jolt that he had accumulated an audience of the other students and faculty milling about the gymnasium.

“It can even go leftie, too,” James said, picking up a second identical keyboard and typing a few words. *Quite handy, eh? Get it? Handy?*

The judges smirked at him, and he beamed, pleased that his project was working.

“I designed them myself,” James said, handing over the two keyboards for the judges to inspect and play with. “I used my own hands for the basic design. I covered my fingers and hands with little motion sensors that could monitor the fine motor skills needed to create every single letter and a few of the symbols you see on the keyboard. And you can adjust the font size too. Let me just…”

He leaned forward and adjusted a switch on the keyboard the head of the science department was holding, and when the judge typed a few nonsense letters, they were slightly larger than the writing already on the paper.

“Could this actually be used on human skin though?” one of the judges asked. “Paper and skin are very different. Require different points of pressure.”

“Sure,” James said, lifting the keyboard out of their hands. He sat down beside one of the hands and moved the hand away from the pad of paper to angle it over his right forearm, which was blank of any ink. “I modeled it so that it would write the best on skin. If it can do skin, it can do paper. And there are obviously different styles of pen that work better on skin, as any soulmated person will tell you. For example, the pens in these hands is the same brand I use with my soulmate. But here, see?”

*Demo time. Say hi, Rose.*

He grinned at his arm as the hand wrote on his forearm, and a few seconds later, he saw Rose write *Hello!*

He stood up away from the hands and rolled down his sleeve, hiding the handwriting as he turned back towards his audience.

“There is obviously room for improvement,” James said, closing up his presentation, “and the applications are limitless.”

He smugly noticed that they all looked rather impressed, and he was quite pleased with himself.

He was impatient for the rest of the science fair to draw to a close. His project worked flawlessly, better than he could’ve hoped, and he was eager to see if he managed to secure a ranking. The top three would move on to the district competition.

Much to his surprise and delight, he’s been ranked first.

“Rose, I won!” he wrote excitedly that afternoon as he transported his project home. “I get to present at districts next month!”

*That’s wonderful James! I told you you’d be brilliant!*
“I have you to thank,” he said sincerely. “You inspired my project. And you listened to me whine and moan and test it out for the past six months.”

I didn’t do anything. You could’ve come up with it on your own. I know you could’ve.

James frowned at his arm. It hurt him to see Rose putting herself down like that. Didn’t she realize how brilliant and special she was? Especially to him.

“All the same, having you always helps,” he said, “so thank you.”

The district science fair competition went just as well for James as his school’s fair did, and Rose beamed at her arm when he told her he had ranked first again.

She chewed on her lip as she tried to figure out how to share her good news. James was still over the moon about having won, which qualified him for the state competition, and she absently flicked the ends of the ribbon from the local art competition she’d entered on a whim. First prize in her age group.

She sucked in a deep breath and decided to go for it.

“James, guess what?”

What?

“Remember that art competition I told you about?” she asked.

Of course I do. But remind me, when is that?

“Today,” she replied.

Today?! Rose, why didn’t you say something?

“You were busy with your science presentation,” Rose said. “But I just wanted to tell you I got first place in my age group.”

Rose! Oh, that’s fantastic! I’m so proud of you! But I can’t believe you didn’t tell me it was today! I feel bad that I nattered on about myself when you were competing too.

“It’s not a big deal,” she said, shrugging.

Rose, don’t do that. Don’t put yourself down like that. Be confident in yourself, and be proud of what you’ve accomplished. And don’t be afraid to share it with me. I love hearing about what you’re doing and the newest project you’re working on. Speaking of, might I get to see this first-prize winning picture?

Rose smiled shyly at her arm, relieved that James didn’t think her winning an art competition was stupid. After all, he built and designed working hands… All she could do was recreate a few photographs James had sent her.

She pulled herself out of that train of thought and focused on James’s genuine (well, genuine-looking) enthusiasm.

“It’ll be in the post tomorrow,” she promised, glancing down at the copy of her drawing and at the news article about the competition.
James was so excited when he received mail from Rose. He eagerly tore into the envelope and pulled out a sheet of paper and a newspaper clipping. He glanced at the newspaper first, and grinned when he saw Rose’s grainy black and white face beaming up at him from beside a fuzzy-looking piece of art. Art that he held in his other hand.

He unfolded the paper and ran his fingers over the nearly-perfect rendition of the bedroom he was sitting in, and of the lanky boy lying on the bed staring out into the night sky. God, she was so amazingly talented, and he was so proud of her.

Another twinge of guilt settled into his belly that he had been so self-absorbed by his science project that he hadn’t kept up to date on her art competition. He vowed to make it up to her however he could. Starting with telling her how proud he was of her.

James eventually went on to rank in the top five of the state’s science fair competition, which qualified him for the regional competitions, which would take place in the fall. Rose was beyond excited for him, as were his parents.

But more than that, he was suddenly getting mail for various colleges and universities all across the country, telling him to check out their physics/engineering/robotics departments. He was suddenly very excited to be in college for real—though he was taking mostly college courses now, it wasn’t quite the same, as he was getting most of the general education requirements out of the way for a lesser fee than normal, thanks to the deal his high school had with the local community college.

And shortly after James entered his senior year of high school, Rose gave him a good morning message that managed to surprise the pants off him.

*Good morning, my James. Fun fact… today marks the day that I have officially known you for half of my life! I’m so glad I met you. Good luck on your calculus test!*

James stared at his arm in shock as he quickly worked through the mental math. And Rose was right: half of her life had been spent with him already. His heart stuttered with warmth at that thought, and he was all too eager for the rest of their forever.

He marked off another day on his Rose countdown… Only 2,422 more days to go…
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Wherein James graduates, and he and Rose run into a little relationship snafu.

James’s science fair project was more successful than he had ever imagined it would be. When he went to the regional competition, hosted in San Diego that year, he ranked in fourth place…

…And the top three went on to the national competition.

Although he was a little disappointed he had just missed the cutoff, he couldn’t be anything other than proud of his bionic hands.

His family and Rose were proud of him too, but for some reason, he seemed to thrive more off of Rose’s praise. Her approval of him meant so much to him, and he was keen on keeping it.

Another perk that came with winning the science fair at multiple competitions was the college offers. He was offered full tuition from every school that accepted him, and he finally decided on MIT on the East Coast.

“Rose, I’ll be back in Massachusetts in autumn!” James told her excitedly when he sent in his acceptance notice.

That’s great, James! This is all so exciting!

Now that James was accepted into a university, he was eager to actually get there, to the next milestone he’d have to cross before he could be with Rose forever.

One February morning, James ticked off a new day on his Rose countdown, and stopped for a minute when he saw that he was on day 2249 out of 4499. Half way there. They were half way there!

“Rose!” he wrote excitedly. “2249/4499!”

James, it’s a little early for algebra.

“No no no! Days, Rose. Days! We have 2249 more days until your 18th birthday!” he explained. “We’re at the halfway point!”

Really? Oh, that’s brilliant! But that’s still really far off.

“Don’t ruin the moment, Rose,” he said.

Right, sorry, of course not. I really am excited. I can’t wait!

“Me either,” he said. “But we can do it. We’ve just lived through 2250 days, only 2249 to go. See, even further than halfway! We’re so close, Rose!”

You’re a nutter.
“But your nutter,” he grinned.

Wanting to get closer to Day Zero wasn’t the only reason James wanted to be out of high school and into college; he was also more than ready to get away from the immaturity of high schoolers. While many of his classmates had grown over their four years together, there were several that didn’t. And there were several who still hadn’t grown out of teasing James about his soulmate. Most of the baseball team still had fun thinking of new ways to rile him up.

He’d gotten very good at ignoring them, but every now and then they would do or say something that would set him off.

Like now, for instance, as he stormed to Principal Finch’s office with his phone in hand.

“Have you seen this?” he demanded, barging into the office, heedless of knocking.

“Mr. McCrimmon, you can’t just come into my office…”

“Have you seen this?” James shouted, thrusting his phone under the principal’s nose.

Mr. Finch sighed and put on his glasses as he held James’s phone towards the light.

James was seething and trembling in his anger as he ran through a list of vengeful acts he could do to get back at the boys who had spray-painted the word ‘pedophile’ across his locker. He knew who the boys were: four members of the baseball team who still enjoyed making lewd and inappropriate comments about his relationship with Rose.

“Well, this certainly is some cause for concern,” Mr. Finch said, handing James his phone back.

“Some?” James said through gritted teeth. “Some cause? These bloody idiots have done nothing but mock my relationship with my soulmate. They’ve harassed me and insulted me, they’ve insulted my soulmate! And what have you done? Not a bloody thing!”

“Mr. McCrimmon, I suggest you calm down and watch your tone.”

“I watch my tone!” James shouted. “Are you kidding me? You’re a sodding idiot, if you’re telling me to calm down!”

“Mr. McCrimmon, you are getting dangerously close to an in-school suspension,” Mr. Finch warned, waving away his secretary, who had peeked her head in when the shouting started.

“You’re joking. You’re actually joking.” James threw up his hands in frustration. “You’re supposed to be in charge and all you’ve done is tell them off. And you’ve barely done that! I think you’ve told me off more harshly than you’ve done them! You know the boys I’m talking about, don’t you. But baseball season is coming up, and you can’t afford to lose your four best players, eh? Is that really more important to you lot? The well-being of a sports team over the well-being of one student?”

“Mr. McCrimmon, that is enough,” Principal Finch scowled. “I am ordering you to in-school suspension for the day. And regardless what you think, the administration of this school takes these kinds of offenses very seriously.”

James bit back a string of curse words as he stalked out of the office and to the suspension room.

The monitor looked a little startled to see him, of all people, in suspension, but she made no comment.
about it, and told James he was to sit there quietly doing homework for the rest of the day.

James pulled out a book and a pen and passed the time chatting with Rose.

When he left school that evening, he saw the four boys at his locker washing off the crude word they’d written. The assistant principal was monitoring them, and James realized this was their punishment. Simply washing off the filth they’d written.

He scowled and walked away from them, wracking his brains for a more suitable punishment for the bloody arseholes.

James sat amidst a sea of people in the football stadium, waiting for the pep rally to kick off the spring sports season.

Just as Principal Finch was about to start the introduction of the baseball team, the sound system cut off and the electronic scoreboard flickered to life.

*Sorry about the hijack, Principal. But I figured there was more important news to share about some of these boys first.*

The whole school was murmuring amongst themselves as the letters popped up on the screen, followed by a few photographs.

The first series of photographs were of a few boys on the baseball team at a party, clearly smashed, with beer bottles and marijuana joints in hand.

The next series of photographs were of some of the boys injecting something into their thighs, and it didn’t take a genius to know they were taking steroids.

*Funny that none of these boys were ever drug tested. They were “ill” on their test date, and their results are still “pending”. I don’t supposed Coach Saxon might have an explanation? Or Principal Finch, for signing off on these athletes to start spring training? Oh, and if I’m not mistaken, Superintendent Lethbridge-Stewart is in attendance today. What do you think of your star athletes, Superintendent?*

The whole school was in a clamor now as the photographs played on a loop, and James quietly sneaked out of the stadium and wandered home.

He was more than pleased by his plan when he’d heard through the grapevine that more than half of the baseball team had been suspended for the first few games, with at least four of them having been suspended for the rest of their high school careers.

He had been called to the Principal’s office after lunch, and was surprised when he saw the Superintendent in the office with Principal Finch. *Uh Oh.*

“Er, yes?” he asked, glancing between the two.

“This is completely off the record, James. We know what you did,” the Superintendent said bluntly, “but we frankly can’t prove a thing. Nor can we figure out how you managed to bypass your way into the school’s records. So we can’t punish you, but I am here to remind you that it a crime to break into the school’s computer system and look into students’ personal files.”

“Yes, sir,” James said, trying to keep the smug grin off his face. “Is that it, then?”
At their nod, he left the room and gleefully went to sixth period Advanced Physics.

The rest of the school year seemed to pass fairly quickly after that. While the boys still picked on James, they no longer made comments about him and Rose, for which he was grateful. He should’ve exploited them years ago.

Graduation was soon upon them, and both James and Rose felt the underlying excitement that came with this milestone. It marked them another step closer to the day they could meet; a little under six years to go until she was eighteen.

Rose wasn’t at all surprised to hear James had graduated as valedictorian of his class, even if he seemed a little astonished. She received mail from James a few days after his graduation, and she was excited to see a series of graduation photos of him with his friends and family. The last photo was a candid shot of him out of his graduation garb and sprawled on a sofa. He was looking at something in his lap, and with a start she realized he was writing on his arm.

She squinted at the picture and could just barely make out her own handwriting next to his. Her stomach fluttered, as though the photograph made her relationship with him that bit more real; not that it ever hadn’t been real, but seeing the physical proof that her handwriting appeared on his arm just like his appeared on her arm made her feel a surge of awe and delight.

They passed the summer together in a similar manner to all of their other summers. They had movie nights every Friday, with one of them picking a film early in the week to give the other enough time to find a copy of the movie. More often than not, James let Rose pick the film because it was much easier for him to locate a copy than it was for her, and he was worried about picking something age-appropriate.

James also started a Harry Potter reread when he realized Rose was starting the series for the first time. They read them and discussed them and cried over them together, and James couldn’t be happier with his life.

Rose, meanwhile, was grateful she had finally gotten old enough to start making her life more interesting and relatable to his, rather than constantly bringing him down into her childish indulgences.

Despite the fun they had together, James was still an anxious, excited mess of a human for most of the summer. He really was eager for school, but he was once again nervous about having to make new friends and fend for himself in the apartment his parents helped him find. And because he wasn’t a legal adult yet, the paperwork he’d had to file, both for school and his apartment, was making him antsy and annoyed.

As always, though, Rose was there for him, encouraging him and supporting him as August drew nearer.

Both of his parents took a week off at the beginning of August to help him move to Boston. His apartment was a few miles from the campus and a few blocks from a bus stop, and he studied the bus schedule and his class schedule to figure out the best times for him to catch the bus.

His parents stayed with him for most of the week, helping him make his apartment more functional and homier, as well as helping him get acclimated to the area.

And when it was time for them to say goodbye, he thought he was as ready as he could be.
James really seemed to take a shine to college. He was always full of stories for Rose, about classes and students and his latest cooking endeavors, and she was happy that he was happy.

At least one of us is enjoying our education, she thought forlornly as she idly flipped through a maths book without really paying attention to the numbers and figures on the page. She was happy for him, she really was. But hearing him talk about his classes—half of which she didn’t even know the basics of—made her feel more inadequate than she already felt. He was so smart and funny and charismatic, everything she wasn’t, and it was getting harder to pretend she was worthy of him. But if James noticed her deepening melancholy, he didn’t say anything.

When James’s birthday rolled around, Rose sent him another CD of her playing the piano, as well as the traditional photograph of herself with the birthday roses he sent her.

“I’m still not sure I’m comfortable with you sending that boy pictures of yourself,” Jackie said grimly as she watched Rose pay more attention to her arm than to her dinner. “And you know the rule. Dinners are my time with you.”

Rose sighed and capped her pen, having just told James she’d talk to him after she was done eating.

“Doesn’t matter if you’re comfortable with it,” Rose said with a hint of impatience. “I’m comfortable with it. He’s my soulmate, and I’ll send him pictures if I want to.”

“But he’s eighteen now!” Jackie protested. “Not that it wasn’t creepy before, a teenage boy having photographs of my little girl. Lord knows what he’s done to them or with them.”

“Mum!” Rose shrieked, scrunching her nose in disgust. “James isn’t like that!”

“Whatever you say,” Jackie said. “Which reminds me, I guess I’d better be having a chat with you about that.”

Rose blinked at her. “A chat about what?”

“Sex,” Jackie said bluntly. “You’re getting older now, and your body’s changing, and you’re going to be feeling urges that you might not know what to do with. Boys your age only have one thing on their mind and sometimes in the heat of the moment…”

“Ew, Mum, stop!” Rose said, cringing. “It’s not like I’d even do…that. Not when I have James.”

“So just because you’ve got a fancy soulmate means you can’t even look at other boys?” Jackie asked incredulously.

“I thought the point of this talk was to keep me from looking at boys?” Rose said, frustrated by her mother’s logic. Well, her lack of logic.

“No, this talk is to make sure you stay safe,” Jackie corrected.

“Thanks Mum, but it’s not necessary,” Rose said, trying not to roll her eyes.

“You say that now, but you never know when a boy will catch your fancy,” Jackie said. “I just want you to be prepared.”

“Never gonna happen,” Rose snorted. “Not til I’m eighteen, at least, and by then I’ll be an adult and do as I please.”
“Oh, Rose, come off it,” Jackie scoffed. “You can’t be that naive to think you and James are going to be virgins when you meet.”

“Maybe I am, yeah!” Rose shouted, slamming her fork onto the table in frustration. “Why can’t you just accept it, Mum? James and I are soulmates! It’s been seven bloody years! How are you this thick?”

“Oi, watch your mouth!” Jackie snapped.

“But it’s true! You’ve never liked James, and I’ve tried so hard to be patient with you, because I love you and you’re my mum, but James is my soulmate. My other half! He’s not gonna go away!”

“Oh, just listen to yourself!” Jackie snapped. “Your ‘other half’. That’s a load of rubbish, Rose! It’s a kid’s story! One you should’ve grown out of by now! There is no such thing as your other half and true love. Just think about it. This James bloke is eighteen now. He’s off at school with other people his age. People who are smart enough and can afford that fancy, top-notch uni you said he’s at. Ask yourself why he would want to wait around for you. He’s a smart, fit, well-off bloke; he could have any girl he wants, and probably has, too.”

“He wouldn’t!” Rose argued weakly, swallowing down the ache in her throat as her mum put voice to all the fears that had been festering in Rose’s mind for the last year or so. “He would never do that!”

“And how would you know? He’s just like any other bloke,” Jackie said, the sharp tone to her voice indicating the conversation was ending. “It’s time to grow up, Rose, and accept your lot in life. I love you, I do, but people like James just don’t fall in love with people like us.”

The lump in Rose’s throat finally grew too big, and Rose choked out a sob as she ran to her bedroom.

She wanted so badly to grab her pen and write to James, but her mum’s words were still echoing in her head, telling her that she was being stupid, and she shouldn’t be bothering James with her nonsense when he had exams and real adult problems to deal with.

Her mum was right. James was eighteen and at uni. She was twelve, and struggling through simple schooling. There couldn’t be two more different people in the universe. The soulmark had definitely been messed up. There was no way someone like James could ever be meant for someone like her. He was meant for someone better.

So she tossed her pen onto her desk, stripped down to her underwear and put on a soft t-shirt and went to bed, regardless of how early it still was.

oOoOo

James stared quizzically at his arm as he got himself ready to go out with a few of his friends for his birthday. Rose said she’d write to him when she finished her dinner, but that was nearly two hours ago.

“That must be quite the dinner affair,” he joked. “I’m about to go out for my own dinner celebration, so I probably won’t be able to chat much tonight. So have a great rest of your evening. And thanks again for your gift!”

When Rose still didn’t reply, James figured she must’ve gone to bed. It was nearly ten at night in London, after all. So he shrugged, grabbed his keys and wallet, and ran outside to the car where his friends were waiting for him.
When James awoke the following morning, Rose had finally written back.

*You’re welcome. I hope you enjoyed dinner.*

“I did,” he said. “My friends took me to a burger joint. Really great burgers in America. You’ll have to try it sometime.”

*Yeah, maybe.*

James furrowed his brow. *Maybe?* Rose was always excited to talk about the future travels they would have together, but today she seemed less than thrilled.

“You okay?”

*Yep.*

Well, she obviously wasn’t. But he wasn’t going to push her. He wanted her to feel like she could talk to him on her own time and on her own terms.

So he rolled down his sleeves and went to class, hoping Rose would feel better soon.

He drew her little doodles throughout the day, hoping his atrocious drawings would brighten her mood. But no matter what he drew, he couldn’t get a reaction from her, so he let her have her space.

The next day, he wrote, “I hope you’re feeling better today.”

She said, *Wasn’t feeling poorly. I’m fine.*

He frowned. As much as he didn’t want to push her, he knew she was lying. Did she really think she could fool him after six years and ten months of being soulmated?

“You’re obviously not,” he countered.

*Just leave it.*

“Fine, but you know you can talk to me about anything,” he said, starting to feel a little frustrated and more than a little helpless.

That frustration morphed into anger when, by the end of the week, Rose was still in her funk. The funk that she adamantly denied she was in.

“Okay, I don’t know what’s wrong,” James said, “but I’m very insulted that you’re still trying to tell me that nothing’s the matter. I know you, Rose, and I know something’s off. Why won’t you just talk to me and tell me what’s the matter? Maybe I could help.”

*And what if you’re the problem?*

James’s heart stuttered into his belly.

“What? What do you mean?”

*Nothing. Forget it.*

“No, Rose, tell me,” he insisted, racking his brain to try and think of what he might’ve done to upset her.
Fine. Have you been shagging girls while you’ve been at school? Or before?

James stared blankly at his arm. It was like the letters didn’t make any sense in the buzzing of his head.

“I don’t understand.”

Just answer me.

“Rose, don’t be stupid.”

Don’t insult me, James. I already feel stupid enough, thanks. I should’ve known better.

“Rose, stop. I didn’t mean to imply I think you’re stupid. You know I don’t think that,” he said, his heart hammering uncomfortably in his chest as he tried to perform damage control. “But how could you even ask me that?”

It’s obvious. And your answers have made it more obvious. It’s fine. Don’t worry, I don’t care.

“It’s not fine! Rose, I’m honestly quite baffled right now, and very insulted.”

Sorry. Didn’t mean to upset you. I should’ve known, really. It’s okay. Who am I to say what you can and can’t do. Got another five and a half years til you’re stuck with me for the rest of your life. If you even want to be. Anyway. Doesn’t matter. Have fun at school James.

That sounded like a dismissal, and James was angry enough to take it. How could Rose even think that of him? How could she think that he would just go off and shag another girl? Or suggest he wouldn’t want to spend the rest of his life with her? She was the most important person in his life! How could she even say that it was okay if he went off and shagged someone else?

His stomach churned at the thought that maybe she’d asked him if he’d had sex because she wanted to know if it was okay if she had sex? Was she old enough to have sex? She was twelve and a half, the age he was when he started living in a state of perpetual sexual frustration…

He collapsed onto his bed and dug the heels of his hands into his eyes as he tried to swallow down the jealousy and bitterness of the thought of someone else touching his soulmate before he did. He’d wanted them to have all of their firsts—first kiss, first date, first time—together, but maybe that had been too selfish of him. Too old fashioned.

“Fuck!” he shouted, tugging on his hair as he tried not to be angry at Rose.

They were separated by three thousand miles and five and a half years. It was only to be expected that she had her own life and was making her own decisions, just like he was. Just because he’d never wanted anything with anyone else didn’t mean she didn’t. And as much as he tried to ignore it, that realization cut him to the quick.

He’d stupidly thought that if he felt so strongly against pre-meeting relationships, then his soulmate would feel the same way. But he’d never implicitly told her as such, he hadn’t thought it was necessary, and now here he was, having his heart broken by the person he had entrusted it to.

He shouted out another litany of curses at his ceiling as he pressed his fingers against the burning ache behind his eyes.

Heedless of the fact he had classes, James curled up on his bed and went to sleep.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Wherein James and Rose make up and Jackie gets a talking to.

James was miserable for the next several days. He had scrubbed off the argument between him and Rose almost immediately after it happened, and he regretted it instantly because his arm looked alien without their words decorating it. He wanted to write something to her, but he didn’t think he could take it if she ignored him.

So he never wrote anything. He missed her so much, but he was still so hurt and angry, and his stomach churned sickeningly whenever he thought back to their last conversation. Surely it wasn’t their last conversation, though. Couples got into disagreements all the time—though they weren’t exactly a couple, so much as friends. If we’re even that anymore, he thought forlornly as he rolled his sleeves down over his bare forearms for at least the tenth time that day.

When his parents video-called him at the end of the weekend, they could tell immediately something was wrong with their son.

“I’m fine,” James said heavily, hoping that if he said it often enough, it would come true.

Neither of his parents believed him, but they didn’t push it.

About a week after his argument with Rose, wherein he still hadn’t said anything to her, or she to him, his dad texted him and asked if everything was really okay. He and Vera were worried about him.

He typed out a reassurance, but his thumb hovered over the send button. Surely his dad would know how to fix things?

“Rose and I got into a fight,” he finally said.

Can I call you? This might be easier over the phone.

James hit the little green telephone icon next to his dad’s picture, and his dad answered immediately.

“Hey, there, mate.”

James’s throat ached at the sound of his dad’s voice, and the sympathy he heard there.

“Want to tell me what happened?”

James couldn’t hold back the flood of words, and he told his dad everything. He told him how Rose had suddenly withdrawn from him and kept lying that she was okay. And about how she then accused him of shagging other girls while he waited for her to be old enough. And finally about how hurt he was that Rose didn’t seem to care that she was the only person he would ever want to be with intimately if she wanted to experiment with sex with other people before they met.

His dad was silent for a long moment before he said, “Rose actually said all of those things?”
An immediate “yes” was on James’s tongue, but then he swallowed it down.

“Well, not as such, no,” James admitted.

“Okay, then what did she actually say?”

“Ehm, I don’t really remember. It happened so fast and I was so angry that I washed it all off,” he said meekly.

“Well, there’s where part of your problem is, James,” his dad said. “You’re angry about something that you’re not sure she even said.”

“She implied it!” James defended. “She asked if I was shagging anyone.”

“Which is a reasonable thing for her to ask,” Robert said patiently. “James, you’re five and a half years older than she is. She’s going through puberty right now, and is learning about all the things teenagers do, and she was probably wondering if you’d had sex already.”

“How could she even think I would?” James said, his heart aching at the lack of trust Rose had in him.

“It’s a logical conclusion for her to make. Put yourself in her shoes for a minute. Imagine Rose was eighteen and in college while you were just twelve years old. She might have been worried that…”

“That what?” James interrupted angrily. “That I would just have sex with anything that moved? Does she really think so low of me?”

“James, stop jumping to such extreme conclusions,” Robert said firmly. “If you did this with her, it’s no wonder a simple, self-conscious question on her part spiraled into an argument.”

Guilt rippled through James. Had he mucked everything up by jumping the gun? Had Rose only been trying to ask a simple question, one she was self-conscious about? Blimey, if so, he’d probably made her feel even worse about herself. *Fuck!*

“James, you need to talk to Rose,” his dad said after James let out a long groan of frustration. “And really listen this time.”

“What if she doesn’t want to talk to me?” he mumbled, scrubbing his hand over his face. “I really fucked up, Dad.”

“Yeah, you did,” Robert agreed. “But so did Rose. It takes two to get into an argument. You’re both at fault here, so you both need to work together to fix it. I imagine she misses you as much as you miss her, but from the sounds of it, you didn’t do anything to calm the fears she had, and she might be nervous to start a conversation with you.”

“But I did!” James protested weakly. “I told her of course I hadn’t…” He paused, thinking back to the argument with Rose. He had told her he hadn’t had sex with anyone, right? And that he didn’t want to? Right? “Fuck. I never told her I never shagged anyone. Fucking hell!”

“Okay, mate, breathe,” his dad said. “I want you to take a deep breath and make yourself a cup of tea. And eat something if you haven’t yet. Then I want you to talk to Rose. Rationally. Make sure to listen to her. And make sure you tell her how you were feeling. Open and honest communication is the key.”

James thanked his dad and quickly ended the call, needing to talk to Rose and explain everything he
should have said last week.

With a hastily-made mug of tea in hand and a frozen pizza heating in the oven, James sat down on his couch with his back to an armrest and his heels wedged into the divider between cushions. He cradled his tea in his hands as he tried to figure out how to start a conversation with Rose.

Rose hardly talked at all to James after the night of their argument. She hardly talked to her mum, either. The atmosphere in the flat was tense, and for once in her life, Rose was glad for school and she welcomed the distraction it provided.

A week passed with no new messages from James, and her heart broke a little more every time she mindlessly rolled up her sleeve to check for a new thread of conversation, only to see her own bare skin.

The night of their argument, she watched as the ink on her arm blurred, and she realized he was washing it off. She felt sick to her stomach, but she went to the bathroom and started washing her arms too. If he didn’t want to see the evidence that he was soulmated to the biggest idiot in the universe, she wasn’t going to stop him.

But she missed him so much. She hoped he was doing okay and that he was happy now that he didn’t have to worry about her all the time. This was how it should’ve been from the start, but she had been so selfish in keeping him to herself.

She had been so stupid to think he loved her. Why had she ever thought someone like James could love someone like her? He’d never explicitly told her—in the almost seven years since they’d been soulmated, he never said the words—but she had foolishly thought that his actions and all of his other words were enough evidence that he loved her. Oh, never before had she been so utterly, heartbreakingly wrong about anything.

She was suddenly so angry, as she always seemed to be now. She was angry at her mum, for putting voice to the fears she’d tried to keep at bay, at the world, for giving her a soulmate who didn’t love her like she loved him, and at James, for being so utterly perfect and lovable, but unobtainable.

She scrubbed her hands over her burning eyes, not wanting to cry again. When the stinging behind her eyes went away, she reached over for the sixth Harry Potter book. It had hurt so much when she finished book five but was unable to talk to James about it.

Rose sniffled back the ache in her throat as she settled against her pillows and opened the book. But her sleeve fell down, and her stomach flipped when she saw blue ink on her forearm.

Hello.

Rose’s heart soared in happiness, before she caught herself and reminded herself that this didn’t change anything. Maybe he was bored or something. Or felt like he had to check up on her.

“Hello,” she wrote, before going back to her book. But the words didn’t make sense, and she read the same paragraph three times without understanding what was said. She sighed and closed the book and set it beside her to await James’s reply.

How are you?

Rose scoffed. How was she? Hurt and angry and heartbroken and embarrassed…
“Been better.”

*Rose, I’m so sorry about last week. Things got out of hand.*

Rose sighed. No, they hadn’t. He had been honest; she was the one who had blown everything out of proportion.

“It’s okay.”

Almost immediately, he wrote, *No, it’s not. I was rude and accusatory when I think you were just asking me an honest question. And I realized I never answered you.*

Rose furrowed her brow. Yes, he did.

*I never shagged anyone. Not in high school, not in uni. And I don’t plan to, either.*

Rose started dumbly at her arm as she tried to take in this conflicting piece of information. But he’d refused to answer her when she asked. He was eighteen and gorgeous, of course he’d had sex before!

Yet here he was, telling her he hadn’t. Was he lying? Was he trying to make her feel better?

She suddenly felt guilty that he now thought he had to stay a virgin.

“You don’t have to not have sex. Really. It’s okay. I understand.”

*No, Rose, you DON’T understand. I don’t WANT to have sex with anyone. I know it’s an old-fashioned notion, and it’s okay if you don’t feel the same. But for me, there’s only you. There’s only ever been you. I’m in love with you, and you alone, and you’re the only one I would ever want to be intimate with.*

Rose’s head was spinning as her eyes stayed fixed on that four-letter word. *I’m in love with you.* He loved her? Really, properly, loved her?

That didn’t make any sense.

“You love me?”

*You’re kidding. Please tell me you’re kidding.*

Uncertainty started to creep back into Rose’s brain, and a long minute passed where she continued to stare at her arm with her heart beating in her throat before his handwriting quickly and messily appeared on her arm.

*I thought you knew! Rose, listen to me very carefully: you are the best thing that has ever happened to me. Ever. I don’t think I’ve ever told you this, but I want you to know:*

*Ever since I can remember, I’ve wanted a soulmate. My parents are soulmates, and I’ve seen the love and happiness they share together, and I desperately wanted that, to share that with someone. When I was five years old, I tried connecting to my soulmate, to you, but you didn’t exist yet. For years I tried connecting with you. But you just weren’t old enough. I finally admitted to myself that I just couldn’t be matched with anyone, and I was convinced I was one of the Unclaimed. Until that New Year’s Day. I woke up and my life was changed forever. You, Rose Tyler, have been the best part of my life since that day. There’s not a day that goes by that I am not incredibly grateful for your existence, and for being your soulmate, and for you being mine. It kills me that you’ve doubted*
my feelings and affections for you. I thought you knew, and I didn’t think it needed saying, because you’re my soulmate, and we’re each other’s other half. But listen to me now: you are everything I could’ve asked for and more, and there isn’t any other person I would rather be soulmated to. I love you. So please don’t ever think otherwise.

By the time he stopped writing, her tears had started up again, but this time, they were dripping down over a smile. Her heart felt full to bursting with love and happiness for James, and relief that he did feel the same way about her that she felt about him.

She picked up her pen and rotated her arms to find a strip of clean skin to write on, and finally found a spot on her right bicep.

“I love you, too, James,” she wrote, and she suddenly felt self-conscious that he’d written her half a novel professing his love for her, and she gave him five words. “I’ve loved you for years. But it’s felt different for awhile now. Deeper, somehow. Like how a book shows love. Does that make any sense? It’s like you’ve been my best friend since I was five, and you’re still my best friend, but you’re so much more than that too.”

That’s how I feel too, Rose. And that’s love, I think. A best friend but also more. I quite like that.

“Me too,” she said. “Can I ask you something? Why didn’t you ever say anything before?”

Why didn’t you?

Rose rolled her eyes.

“I asked you first,” she said.

There was a few seconds’ pause before he wrote, I was worried I was being inappropriate. Or maybe you didn’t think of me like that. I didn’t want to overwhelm you or make you feel uncomfortable with declarations of my undying love if you weren’t ready to hear them, or didn’t want to hear them.

Rose laughed at her arm. He pretty much said exactly what she had been thinking.

“That’s what I thought, too,” she said. “Figured someone like you wouldn’t really love someone like me. Especially for as young as I am.”

Stop just a minute. What do you mean someone like you? Rose, you’re perfect and beautiful and talented and smart and funny. What’s not to love about you?

“Dunno. Just something my mum said.”

A few minutes passed, and Rose worried James was reconsidering.

Might I have your phone number, Rose Tyler?

“Why?”

If you haven’t noticed, we’ve run out of arm.

Rose giggled at her blue and red colored arms, and had to admit he had a point. But…

“I’m going to bed soon anyway,” Rose said. “This’ll all get washed off tomorrow morning and we’ll have a blank slate to work with.”
Might I have your phone number anyway? You know, in case of emergency so situations like this don’t happen again?

“Okay,” she conceded, and she wrote down her phone number, not really expecting him to ever use it.

Before you go to sleep, can we promise each other that we’ll never go a week without speaking again? That was a bit torturous.

“Yes, it was,” she agreed. “And maybe if we ever have some sort of disagreement in the future, we talk about it right away?”

It was more a misunderstanding than disagreement, but yes. My dad always said open honesty is the foundation of a solid relationship, and I think he’s got a point. Can we also agree never to lie to each other again? And not try and convince each other we’re fine when we’re not?

Guilt knotted into Rose’s stomach.

“Yeah. Sorry about that.”

Not your fault. We both share the blame in this. But we got through it together. Now, time for all the Londoners to go to bed.

Rose smiled. “Night James. Love you.”

Goodnight, my precious Rose. Sleep well. I love you, too.

oOoOo

James was almost giddy with relief when he went to bed that night. Rose loved him! Actually, properly loved him! He lay in bed and ran his fingers across his and Rose’s words, relieved that his arms weren’t bare anymore.

The following morning, however, his arms were blank again, and he nearly had a panic attack that he’d dreamt the resolution with Rose, until he saw her handwriting on his wrist.

Morning, James!

He exhaled heavily, and grinned at his arm.

“Good morning, Rose! I hope you slept well! So, what’s on the docket for today?”

Nothing really. I’m half-way through HP6 and am hooked. I’m hoping to finish it this weekend.

James’s heart fell when he realized during his Week of Stubborn Arseholery, he’d missed out on the entire discussion of book five. Did she like it? Did she cry when Sirius died? What did she think of Harry’s characterization? And Luna? And the DA?

“Can we take a step back a minute and finish our discussion about HP5?” he asked.

He smiled in relief when Rose was agreeable, and they passed the morning and part of the afternoon discussing the ins and outs of The Order of the Phoenix.

He loved how passionate and protective she was of Harry, and how she defended his mood swings and emotional outbursts.
He’s a 15-year-old boy who watched his classmate get murdered! And no one believes him! I’d be angry too! But at least his friends are there for him. Doesn’t matter what everyone else thinks, I suppose, as long as the people who love him are there for him.

Oh, that reminded him…

“Yesterday you’d mentioned that your mum had told you something that made you doubt our relationship,” James said, wondering if he was overstepping his boundary. “You don’t have to tell me, of course, but I was just wondering what was said.”

James got up and cleared the dishes from breakfast and set about making lunch and a new cup of tea as he waited for Rose to reply. Just as the kettle started boiling, she wrote, It’s stupid.

“No it’s not,” he argued. “If it upset you, it’s not stupid.”

He carried his cup of tea and turkey sandwich back to his sofa and settled against the cushions once more.

It’s not a big deal. I’m used to it. I know how you feel now, and that’s the important thing.

James sighed. “All right. But it kills me to know your mother has been upsetting you because of me. I’m sorry she isn’t as supportive as you deserve.”

Several long minutes passed before Rose said, She told me that people like you don’t fall in love with people like me. And that I was being childish and naive to think that you were my one true love and vice versa. That’s where the sex question came from too. Stupid, I know, but it really got to me.

James’s ears were ringing as he clenched his jaw against the rising anger. How dare anyone tell Rose that she wasn’t good enough! How dare her own mother say this! He was furious, but he realized he needed to answer Rose, to put to rest any fears and doubts she might still have.

“Don’t listen to her, Rose,” he said. “You are my one true love, because that’s what having a soulmate is all about. And if she doesn’t understand, there’s nothing you can do to make her understand. And if she ever says anything like that to you again, let me know and I’ll give you plane ticket to Boston and you can come live with me.”

Ooh, a 12-year-old shacking up with an 18-year-old… How scandalous.

James’s cheeks flushed as he realized what he’d said and all it implied.

“I just want you safe and happy,” he said.

I know. Thank you. Really. But I think I can handle my mum and her comments about you and our relationship. Been doing it for almost seven years now. Another five and a half won’t hurt.

“But if it does, just know you’ll always be welcome in my home,” he told her sincerely. “And with my mum and dad. They’re over the moon about you, you know.”

They are?

James’s heart broke again. A parent should be happy that their child is happy, and it hurt that Rose wasn’t getting that from her mum. He leaned forward and picked up his phone from the coffee table before scrolling to the phone number Rose had given him.

“Of course,” he said. “You make me happier than I’ve ever been, and they love you for that.”
Your parents sound so lovely. I can’t wait to meet them.

“You’ll love them,” he said as he pressed the call button. “My dad enjoys doing art in his spare time, and my mum plays the piano too. You’ll get on so well with both of them.”

James nearly jumped out of his skin, having momentarily forgotten he’d started a phone call, when a thick Cockney accent said, “Hello,” in his ear.

“Hello?” the voice said again with a touch of impatience.

“Jackie Tyler?” he assumed.

“Yeah, who’s speaking?”

“This is James. Ehm, James McCrimmon. I’m…”

“Yeah, I know who you are,” Jackie interrupted wearily. “How did you get this number. If Rose gave it to you…”

A hot pressure settled high in his stomach and made his scalp tingle in irritation.

“Yes, she did, and I’m going to stop you right there,” James said angrily. “I would appreciate it very much if you would stop insulting Rose.”

“What do you mean, insulting Rose?” Jackie huffed. “And mind you, you’re insulting me right now. How do I know you’ve not been this rude to her?”

“As if I ever could be,” James scoffed, massaging his temples as he tried not to completely lose his temper with Rose’s mother. “You, on the other hand, have made Rose cry this week, and in past weeks over the last few years.”

“Barmy, you are,” Jackie said. “As if I’d upset my little girl.”

“And yet Rose says differently,” he retorted, looking back at the words Rose told him Jackie had told her.


“The argument that the two of you had last week,” James said stiffly. “Where you suggested to her that I’ve been shagging my way through the girls at school? Or that it was childish of Rose to think I would ever be in love with her?”

“Do you mean to say you haven’t been shagging your way through school?” Jackie challenged. “Or that you’ll still want Rose ten years down the road? This isn’t some game you get to play with her…”

“Jackie Tyler, I’ve heard enough,” he hissed. “I need you to listen very carefully, and understand me well. Rose has been the best part of my life for nearly seven years. She is truly my other half, as fairy tale as that may sound to you, and I will not tolerate you upsetting her about something that is so important to the two of us. We’re soulmates, Jackie, and I don’t know if you’re in denial, or being obtuse, but I will gladly accept and forgive either of those because then that means you aren’t deliberately trying to belittle your daughter for the relationship she has with me. A relationship which, I might add, she could not control. No one has a choice in being soulmated, and no one has a choice about who their soulmate is. Rose couldn’t have stopped this even if she wanted to. And I wouldn’t ever want her to. I love her, Jackie. Have done for seven years. She may be your daughter,
but she is my soulmate, and I will not have you upsetting her like you’ve been doing. Not about me, and not about her love of art either. She’s a wonderful artist whose spirit has been crushed time and time again by her own mother who can’t see her talent for the beautiful gift that it is. So get your head out of your arse and try to be supportive of your own child. Have I made myself clear?”

Jackie was silent for so long that James feared the line had gotten disconnected.

Finally, Jackie whispered, “Yeah.”

“Good,” he said, still simmering in anger. “Now, if you wouldn’t mind, is Rose there? I’d very much like to speak with my soulmate.”

“Yeah, just a mo’.”

He heard Jackie’s shout, and a muffled answer, and his heart sped up. This was it. He was about to speak to Rose…

“Hello?”

God, she had a beautiful voice.

“Er, hi,” he said stupidly, trying to force his tongue to work. “Rose? Hi, it—it’s me. It’s James.”

“James?”

“Hello,” he said, strumming his fingers nervously on his thigh.

“Oh, my God!” she squealed, and his heart stuttered at the sheer excitement and happiness in her voice. Happiness because of him. “James! Hi! I never expected you to phone!”

“You wound me, Rose Tyler,” he said, trying not to sound too hurt that she thought so little of him.

“No, I just meant…” she trailed off awkwardly then whispered, “Y’know.”

“Is this still about our conversation yesterday?” he demanded, his anger at her mother flaring once more.

Her silence confirmed it.

“I need you to listen to me very carefully, Rose, because this is very, very important,” he said, and he took a deep breath in preparation to say the words. “I love you. I love you so much. You are my soulmate and you are so perfect to me, perfect for me, and I would never ever want anyone else, because who else could be as fantastic as you?”

He heard a sniffling over the line, and he desperately wanted to give her a hug.

“Yeah?” she whispered, her voice wavering.

“Oh, yes,” he said softly.

*Has that boy made you cry?*

James grimaced at Jackie’s shrill voice.

“Your mother is, ehm, quite the character,” he said lightly, and he grinned in triumph when he heard her giggle.
“She means well,” Rose said. The fact that she was still defending her mother after all Jackie had said to Rose made James’s heart swell even more with love for Rose. His kind, compassionate Rose. “What did you say to her, anyway? She’s being awfully nice about this.”

“I only said what I’ve been wanting to say for the past seven years,” he said truthfully. “No one makes my soulmate cry.”

She giggled out a sob as she said, “Well, right now you’re making me cry.”

“You know what I mean,” he said softly. “It infuriates me that your mother made you doubt my feelings for you, or made you think you were unimportant to me. I don’t want you to ever doubt anything I tell you, Rose. It hurt…”

He bit his tongue before it could get away from him more than it already had.

“Hurt what?”

He sighed. “It hurt me that you would think I’d go around shagging other girls. It really hurt, Rose.”

“I’m sorry,” Rose said contritely.

James cringed and rubbed his eyes; they’d already gone over this, why had he brought it up again.

“You’re forgiven, Rose,” he said gently. “Of course you are. I was a git and acted rashly. But all cleared up. You believe me now, though, right?”

“Of course,” Rose said immediately, and James let out a breath of relief.

“Excellent!” he said happily. “Now, I do believe we were in the middle of a very important discussion… Rose Tyler, what did you think of the death of Sirius Black?”

James set his empty plate and mug on the floor and relaxed back into the cushions of his sofa. He closed his eyes and let the cadence of her voice soothe away the last of the heartache of the past week.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Wherein Rose and James take advantage of having each other's phone number.

The phone’s battery beeped in Rose’s ear just a few seconds before the oven did. Jackie shot her a warning glance and said loudly, “Dinner’s ready!”

James paused in the middle of a speech that had started off about house elf rights but had somehow morphed into women’s rights and feminism. He’d heard Jackie’s not-so-subtle hint to wrap up their conversation, and he only just realized how long they’d been talking.

“Ehm, I suppose I should let you get going, eh?” James asked, and Rose was pleased to hear the hint of reluctance in his voice. She didn’t particularly want to hang up either, but knew the phone’s battery would run out soon, along with her mother’s patience.

“I suppose,” Rose sighed. “This was really nice. I… I’ve missed you.”

“Oh, Rose, I missed you too,” he said softly. “But go on, have your dinner. Don’t want to keep your mum waiting and undo the bit of progress we made with her.”

Rose snorted out a laugh as she glanced at her mother, who was trying to make it look like she wasn’t listening in on their conversation. Rose turned her back to her mum and said, “I’ll talk to you after dinner.”

“Quite right,” James said. “Until then, Rose Tyler.”

Rose hung up the phone with a wide grin on her face. She’d just spoken to her soulmate!

He had such a beautiful voice. She’d known he was Scottish, but to actually hear the accent… And the way her name rolled off his tongue… An unfamiliar heat bubbled in her belly, and Rose felt giddy with delight.

Dinner was a somewhat awkward affair. Jackie tried to make small talk, but Rose could tell she had something else on her mind, and she braced herself for her mum’s disapproval of Rose’s hour-long phone call with James.

However, no words were forthcoming until Rose had cleared her plate and eagerly turned towards the hallway, intent on spending the rest of her evening at Hogwarts with James.

“Rose, can I have a second?”

Rose sighed and tensed her shoulders as she spun back around to face her mother.

“Sweetheart, I owe you an apology.”

Rose blinked. She had not been expecting those words. “What?”

Jackie inhaled deeply before she said, “I’ve not been very fair to James. Or to you.”
“No, you haven’t,” Rose said, bitterness welling up once more in her chest.

“And I’ve not been supportive of you,” Jackie continued. “You know I love you sweetheart, and I only want what’s best for you, and to protect you from the darker parts of life. I didn’t know who James was or what he wanted with you…”

“He’s my soulmate, Mum, but you’ve been too bloody stubborn to listen to me,” Rose snapped.

Jackie’s eyes hardened for a second before she exhaled heavily and her shoulders slumped.

“You’re right,” she admitted, much to Rose’s surprise. “And that was wrong of me. But I think I’m ready to listen now.”

Rose gawped at her mum for longer than was appropriate.

“I didn’t realize I was hurting you so much,” Jackie said. “But it was pointed out to me, rather rudely, I might add. And I want to be better. For you. And if that boy makes you happy, then so be it.”

“He does, Mum, he really does,” Rose whispered. “I love him, and he loves me.”

Jackie nodded and inhaled deeply. She reached out and took Rose’s hand before squaring her shoulders to look Rose in the eye. “I’ve got to ask, sweetheart, because I’m your mum and it’s my job. He hasn’t been… inappropriate at all, has he? He’s never hurt you? Or made you feel uncomfortable?”

Rose blinked. For once, there was no accusation in her mum’s voice when she asked about James.

“No, he hasn’t,” she replied. “He wouldn’t. He’s aware of our age gap and has always been so polite and understanding. Even when I was little. He’s so smart, but he used little words and sentences for me so I could understand him and have conversations with him. And he played those stupid little kid games with me all the time. And told me my drawings were pretty when I’m fairly certain they were rubbish. He’s so wonderful, Mum, and I wish you could see it.”

Jackie’s eyes stung at the soft reverence in Rose’s voice. For as much as Jackie had loved Pete, she couldn’t ever remember a voice being as tender as her daughter’s was now.

“Well, all right, then,” Jackie sniffed, pulling Rose in for a hug. “I can’t promise I’m going to be completely accepting of him right away. It’s gonna take a while. And some patience. But I’m willing to try for you, sweetheart.”

“Thanks, Mum,” Rose whispered. She hugged her mother tightly as the heavy weight that had been in her stomach for over week finally disappeared.

oOoOo

James sat back in his chair and he rifled through a box of miscellaneous wires and tools, with his bionic hands strewn in front of him on the lab bench. He had hit it off with his physics professor right away, and she had offered her laboratory to James for him to work on his robotic hands, or for a quiet place for him to study.

He had been thrilled, even if her research students hadn’t been at first—upperclassmen having to watching a freshman come in and make himself at home in the research lab was a bitter pill to swallow. But James managed to charm most of them well enough that they found his presence a nice addition to their little group.
James finally found the resistors he was looking for and worked on replacing the ones in the hands.

With the resistors replaced and some of the circuitry rewired to hopefully give the hands better charging power, James stared at his own hands bearing Rose’s handwriting. She was lamenting and fretting about an exam she had at the end of the week, and James grimaced in sympathy.

“You can do this,” he encouraged. “You’re brilliant!”

_Not with algebra, I’m not._

“Oh, it’s not that bad,” he cajoled, trying to put her mind at ease. “It’s quite straightforward once you get the hang of it.”

It took several minutes for Rose to answer, but he assumed she was caught up on a practice problem. As per his study suggestion, for every problem she worked through, she would then write something to him.

It seemed to be taking longer than usual, and he was about to offer his assistance when she wrote, _Please don’t say things like that to me, James. This might be easy for you, because you’re a genius, but for me, this is hard and it hurts to be reminded that I can’t do basic bloody maths._

James gaped at his arm as a cold weight settled in his stomach. He’d meant to make her feel better, not worse. _Oh, bollocks!_

“Rose, I’m sorry,” he said immediately, “I didn’t mean it like that.”

_Doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt. Anyway. It’s late, and I’m tired and have half a headache. I’ll talk to you tomorrow._

James muttered curses under his breath as he rubbed at his eyes.

“No, Rose, wait,” he protested.

_It’s late. Night, James._

He slouched in his seat, wanting to keep talking to her to apologize, but he was also aware that Rose might be too upset to forgive him right now.

“Right. Okay,” he said. “Night, Rose. And I really am sorry.”

_I know. Night._

“I love you,” he wrote, desperate to end her night on a more positive note.

_Love you, too. Talk to you later._

He exhaled raggedly before pushing away from his desk, grabbing his bag, and heading home.

All night he tried to think of a way to make it up to her, but ultimately realized it could only be resolved once she was awake and they were talking again.

He sighed and went to bed early, but not before he drew her a good morning message, complete with badly-drawn flowers and geometric designs in hopes it would make her smile.

He was antsy for most of the next day as he waited for Rose to get off of school. It was finally 11am and James was just getting home from his one and only class of the day. He made up a mug of hot
chocolate and a plate of toast before plopping himself down on his couch.

“How are you feeling?”

_Stressed._

“Anything I can do to help?” he asked.

_Nope._

“Are you still upset with me from last night?”

_Not really. Only a little. More upset at me than you though._

“I really am very sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to imply that this was easy, I know it’s not easy. Believe me. Do you think I’ve never struggled with my maths classes? Yes, I tend to pick it up a little quicker than most, but I also had to work hard at it.”

_It doesn’t seem to matter how hard I work, though. I still don’t understand any of it._

An immediate protest was at the tip of his pen, but he knew that wasn’t what Rose wanted to hear.

“I think you understand it better than you think you do,” he hedged. “You don’t give yourself enough credit. And it doesn’t matter if algebra doesn’t come easy to you. Not everyone is perfect at everything.”

_You are._

“Nah,” he said. “Have you seen me try to do art? Bloody rubbish at it.”

_True._

“What, you don’t like my stick figures?” he asked, quickly doodling one of the two of them holding hands. “I mean, they look like they have a touch of scoliosis, but not bad!”

James watched as a quick sketch of his face appeared on his forearm beside his stick figures.

“Show off,” he teased. “But back to the topic at hand: would you want my help? I can try and talk you through some of it?”

_You don’t have to. It’s all right._

“I don’t mind. Honestly.”

_You sure?_

“Wouldn’t have offered if I wasn’t,” he replied.

_Yeah, okay. Can’t hurt._

He grabbed his phone and typed in the number he knew by heart. After a couple rings, Rose picked up.

“Hello?”

“Hello,” he said brightly. “Right then, Rose Tyler, how can I help?”
“By giving me a better brain?” she said weakly, and the dejection in her voice broke his heart.

“Stop that,” he chastised softly. “Your brain is perfect and wonderful just as it is.”

“Sure,” Rose said dismissively. “Now, how do you want to do this?”

“Well, it might be easiest if you write down the problems you’re working on on your arm, and I can walk you through them if you get stuck?” he suggested.

He heard some muffled clattering and shuffling before Rose’s voice went a little staticky.

“Right, you’re on speaker,” she said.

James lounged back on his sofa as he watched her start to write numbers and equations on his arms. For over two hours he worked with her, offering her helpful hints and mnemonics in an attempt to make studying as painless as possible and to make the concepts hopefully make a little more sense.

He proudly watched Rose solve the quadratic equation correctly when someone entered the room with Rose.

“Rose sweetheart, what do you fancy for supper? Oh… I thought you said you had a test to study for!”

James cringed. While Rose said that Jackie was getting better with her acceptance of him, the woman still put him on edge and made him feel uncomfortable and self-conscious.

“I do,” Rose said. “James is helping me study. See?”

She must’ve shown Jackie her number-covered arms.

“Hmm, okay then,” Jackie said a little stiffly. “Hello, James.”

“Hi, Jackie,” he replied. “How are you today? Well. This evening, I suppose?”

“Fine, and you?” she asked.

“Quite well, thanks. Right, Rose, you’ve solved the last ten questions perfectly. Well, a few calculator mishaps, but those happen to the best of us,” he said. “How’re you feeling now?”

“Better, thanks,” she replied, and the relief in her voice made him smile happily. “I mean it. Thank you so much, James.”

“You’re very welcome,” he said. “And don’t be nervous to ask for help in the future, okay?”

“But you’ve got your own exams to study for,” Rose protested. “Which are much more difficult than mine.”

“You’d be surprised at how much of my course load is just algebra,” he said. “Granted, there are a lot more steps than your problems, but the fundamentals never change. That’s why they’re called fundamentals. So really, tutoring you is also helping me. So thank you!”

Rose giggled at him. “You’re a nutter.”

“But your nutter,” he said happily.

“And I say you’re both nutters,” Jackie interjected. “If you two are done, Rose, dinner’s almost
James’s cheeks flushed when he remembered he wasn’t alone with Rose.

“Er, right, yep,” he stammered, scratching at the back of his neck. “Well, I’ll let you go. Enjoy your dinner, love. Ehm. Bye!”

Rose laughed at him again and said, “Talk to you later. Love you.”

He scrubbed his hands over his face after tossing his phone onto the cushions beside him. A new flash of red on his palm caught his eye.

I liked hearing you call me love.

He stared at his hand as a slow smile crossed his face. Warmth and love for his Rose prickled across his skin, and he sadly thought back to the Rose countdown in his room, which was still distressingly long.

“Then I’ll be sure to say it often,” James promised.

The weekend passed by quickly, with them both crying over the ending of The Half-Blood Prince.

“At least you don’t have to wait two years and five days for book seven!” James said. “Longest two years and five days of my life, I’ll tell you! There has never been a truer test of patience than when waiting for the release of the next book in a series.”

Well, we’ll still have to wait a few days, Rose said. Ordered it from the library but I’m on the waitlist. Dunno when it’s supposed to come in.

James stared at his arm in surprise. He had (foolishly) assumed she owned the books. He felt a surge of shame and embarrassment when he realized he’d forgotten, once again, that Rose and her mum weren’t as well-off, and didn’t have the luxury of buying whatever they wanted whenever they wanted.

He pulled open his laptop and instantly pulled up Amazon and their book selection.

“That’s all right, Rose Tyler!” he said, adding the complete series to his cart. “I think I can find a way for us to read them sooner than whatever the speed of your library is.”

What do you mean?

“Consider it an early Christmas gift,” he said, typing in Rose’s address and selecting express shipping. “Should be at your door in two days’ time.”

James! You don’t have to buy the book for me!

“I want to,” he said earnestly. “You should know by now that I thoroughly enjoy giving you gifts and doting on you.”

It makes me feel bad that I can’t reciprocate.

“But you do!” he said, thinking back to his wall in his bedroom that was covered with all of the drawing she’d made for him since they’d been soulmated. “Every time you send me a new drawing, or photograph, or CD of your music. You send me new stuff even when it’s not a holiday, and I
adore them every time a new drawing comes in. I promise you, Rose, they are the most precious gifts I’ve ever received. And I like making you happy. So please, let me buy you a few books?”

A long moment passed before she finally said, *Okay. Thank you.*

“You’re very welcome,” he said, clicking the submit button for his order.

James waited somewhat patiently for the books to come in to Rose, and his patience payed off when Monday afternoon Rose wrote, *Guess what?*

“The books came in?” he asked eagerly.

*Yep! And my teacher gave my algebra test back. 86%!*

Pride throbbed through James’s heart as he grinned at his arm.

“Oh, fantastic! I’m so proud of you, Rose!”

*I should be thanking you, James! You’re a really great teacher. Have you ever thought of becoming one?*

James stared at his arm. He’d loved tutoring Rose, and the pride he felt now when he saw their hard work had paid off was an intoxicating feeling. No wonder his parents loved teaching.

“You know, I never thought of it,” he admitted. “But I might consider it now. University professor. Doctor James McCrimmon. Has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?”

*Very impressive, Doctor.*

James giggled at his arm.

“Right, enough chitchat,” he said, “we’ve got a book to get through!”

:oOoOo:

“Rose! Merry Christmas! Well. Almost Christmas. Christmastime. There we go! Merry Christmastime, Rose!”

Rose grinned at the happy giddiness in his voice, and the slight slur to his rambling words.

“You may want to lay off the eggnog,” she said.

“Pfft, what’s the point of Christmas if not the eggnog?”

“Well, I hope you’re back in Scotland, otherwise you’re breaking the law of the drinking age,” she teased.

“Yep, back in Scotland,” James said boisterously. “Just flew in last night. And that American drinking age is utter rubbish, Rose. No one even follows it! Why shouldn’t I be allowed to have a drink or two in the privacy of my home? Eh?”

“Because the government has said otherwise,” Rose replied.

“Rubbish,” James said again. “So what are you up to this glorious Saturday morning? Well. It’s glorious here. How’s it in London?”
“It’s raining,” Rose said, glancing out the window at the gray skies. “Not exactly a surprise. But other than that, I’m helping mum decorate the flat when she gets home. Been taking stuff out of the closet all morning.”

“Me too! I love decorating for Christmas. Mum and Dad got home a few days before me and got a tree, and now we’re trying to set it up,” James said. “Ehm, which reminds me… Can I put you on speakerphone, love? Decorating might go a tad more smoothly if I’ve got both hands.”

“I can call you later,” Rose hurriedly said. “Don’t want to take away from time with your family.”

“Pfft,” James scoffed. “You’re my family too, Rose.”

Warm happiness pooled in her belly until she felt just as drunk as James.

“So can I?” he asked, his voice growing distant as a muffled clattering resounded through the phone.

“Er, sure,” Rose said, tapping her fingertips on her thigh. “You’re mum and dad are there?”

She heard a bit of rustling then some static before he said, “Yep! You’re on speaker. Say hi!”

“Hello,” she said nervously.

“Hello, sweetheart.”

“Hello, Rose.”

Some of the butterflies disappeared with how warm their voices sounded.

“Rose, I’ve gotta go help my dad put the tree in the stand,” James said. “I’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere!”

Rose giggled as she heard scuffling and muffled voices. She chewed on her lip as an awkward silence descended.

“It sounds like you’re having fun decorating,” she finally said.

“Oh yes, this time of the year is James’s favorite,” Vera said. “He loves decorating and getting into the Christmas spirit.”

“Sounds lovely,” Rose sighed, glancing at the box containing her and her mum’s artificial tree. “Wish I could spend the holidays with you lot.”

Vera chuckled. “Don’t tell James that, or there will be no force on Earth strong enough to keep him from collecting you from London.”

Rose laughed, and her stomach clenched with the desire to spend Christmas with her soulmate.

“Don’t tell James what?”

Rose giggled at his muffled shout.

“Nothing, darling,” Vera said smoothly.

“Roooose!” he whined.

“It’s nothing,” she said. “Go back to setting up the tree. I think it’s still a little crooked.”
“Yeah?” James called back. Muffled grunting came through the line. “How about now?”

“I think you’ve made it worse,” Rose teased.

“Yeah? I’d like to see you try it!”

“In six Christmases I will,” she challenged. “And it’ll be the biggest, straightest, prettiest tree you’ve ever seen.”

“Oh, I’m sure it will be,” he murmured.

His voice had softened with an emotion that made Rose’s heart swell and her stomach flip. God, she loved him, and she didn’t think she could wait another 1,961 days to meet him in person. She’d go barmy.

“I’ve never seen James happier than when he’s talking with you,” Vera said softly, breaking Rose out of her thoughts. “You’re really good for him, darling.”

“He’s good for me too,” Rose admitted. “But isn’t that what soulmates are supposed to be?”

“Quite right,” Vera agreed. “So how are you, sweetheart? How’s school.”

Rose let out a distressed grunt before she said, “I’m sure James has told you how rubbish I am at maths. And science. Everything he’s brilliant at.”

“But he’s also said you’re fantastically brilliant at the arts and languages,” Vera said, directing Rose towards the positive.

“I suppose,” Rose allowed.

Vera chuckled. “You don’t give yourself enough credit, Rose. I’ve seen your drawings and listened to you play the piano. You’re marvelous, darling. Truly.”

“Thanks,” Rose mumbled, feeling a little self-conscious and more than a little pleased at the praise.

“And don’t worry about being bad at maths,” Vera said. “Even I’m not that great at it.”


“It does, to an extent,” she said. “But maths has never been my strength. Struggled through it all my life. Still struggle with it. Thankfully there are computers that do most of the calculations and statistics and whatnot. All I’ve got to do is interpret it and make connections and conclusions. I’ve learned what I’ve needed, and the rest I pick up along the way when I have to. Same with you. You’ll figure out what you need and how to use it. Most people don’t ever use these skills again, so don’t get too caught up on it, sweetheart.”

“Thanks,” Rose said, feeling a little more confident in her abilities.

“Anytime,” Vera said sincerely. “Oh, I think James is back.”

“So what’ve you two been chatting on about?” he asked. “By the way, that tree is perfect now, Rose.”

“I’m sure it is,” she said indulgently. “Master tree crafter, you are.”
He let out a humming giggle that sounded so happy and content, Rose wished she could hear that sound every day.

“Are you sure we can’t say sod it and get together at Christmastime?” he whined, his voice suddenly forlorn.

“Can’t,” Rose answered automatically, even though she very much wanted to say yes. “Taboo, remember.”

“It’s only taboo if we get caught,” James pointed out.

“James, don’t tempt me,” she sighed.

He let out a rough exhale and admitted softly, “It seems like time is moving backwards. Every time I cross off another day until your eighteenth birthday, I logically know that we’re one day closer, and that it should feel like we’re making progress. But I see that we’re still in the thousands and I just… I really want you here with me.”

Her heart ached at the longing in his voice, and she bit her tongue to keep from agreeing with him. James was stubborn and determined, and if he knew how desperately she wished to be with him too, there would be nothing that would stop him from making it happen.

But she knew her mum would be furious, and she knew what the rest of the world would say, particularly about him, as he was the oldest. She’d seen a few of the news articles about the soulmates that met too soon, and the backlash from the law that came with it. No, she wouldn’t let his reputation get tarnished because they couldn’t be patient.

“We’ve made it through seven years,” Rose said, trying to think positively. “S’over two and a half thousand days. We can wait five and a half more years.”

James grunted in displeasure, but didn’t offer any more arguments.

“Can you believe it’s been two and a half thousand days?” he said softly. “Incredible, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it is,” Rose said. “And we’re only just beginning. Still got forever ahead of us.”

James made that happy humming noise again before he said, “Forever with you, Rose Tyler? I quite like the sound of that.”
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Wherein we get a closer look at James's parents and how much they love Rose, they all celebrate Christmas, and we go through a three-year time jump.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has a trigger warning for miscarriages (obviously not James and Rose) during Vera and Jackie’s conversation.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course,” James answered, idly flicking through the channels to find something to watch. Nothing but Christmas movies. “And what do you say to It’s a Wonderful Life? I’ve not watched that this year yet.”

“Sounds good,” Rose replied. There was a long pause before she said, “How much is it for you to go to uni?”

“Nothing,” he said, getting up to raid the kitchen of the cooling Christmas biscuits he and his parents made earlier that day.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Well, I’m on an academic scholarship,” he explained, biting off the gingerbread man’s head. “My grades and test scores were good enough that they’re paying for me to go to their school.”

“Oh,” Rose said softly. “So how much would it cost for someone to go to uni if they weren’t on a scholarship?”

“Well,” James said, blowing out a noisy breath as he quickly did the mental maths. “It depends on the type of the school, and if they’re in the US or the UK, and on any outside financial aid received. But tuition alone can be anywhere from ten to twenty thousand dollars per year in America—that’s about eight to fifteen thousand pounds. In England, the max is about ten thousand pounds. Some schools might be higher, some lower. But that’s a reasonable range. But then there’s books and living expenses and random fees and whatnot.”

Rose was silent on the other end of the line.

“What’s this about, love?” he asked gently.

“Nothing,” Rose mumbled. “S’stupid.”

“Firstly, no it isn’t,” James said, “and secondly, please don’t lie to me, Rose. We promised. Remember?”
“Yeah,” she sighed. “Sorry. It’s just… I’d been thinking maybe I’d go to uni one day too. But I don’t think I could afford that. S’not like I’ve even got money put aside or anything. And there’s no way Mum could help me out. And I’m not smart enough for all those scholarships. I just… I dunno.”

“You’re brilliant,” he argued. “And if you want to go to uni, you can go. There are plenty of other scholarships available. And government programs to help supplement the costs. Don’t talk yourself out of it so quickly, Rose.”

“Yeah,” she said quietly. “Dunno if I’d even want to go. M’not really good at school. Don’t like it all that much.”

“Uni’s different,” James promised. “Right now you’re still required to take all those silly classes that don’t interest you. In uni you can pick and choose what to take and make it interesting for yourself. And it’s not like you’re sitting in classes for hours at a time. It’s a couple hours a day, not necessarily back to back. It’s a lot more freedom. I think you’d actually love it.”

“We’ll see,” she finally said, and James frowned at the defeat in her voice. “But hush now, I want to watch the film. Never seen this before.”

oOoOo

Vera tapped her fingertips across her kneecap as she waited for someone to answer the phone.

“Hello?”

“Jackie Tyler?” she asked.

“Yes, who is this?”

“This is Vera,” she said. “Vera McCrimmon. James’s mum.”

“Yeah, I know who you are,” Jackie said. “What can I do for you?”

“Well, I was phoning because my husband and I would like to give Rose a Christmas gift this year,” she said, “but we wanted to make sure you would be okay with the gift we had in mind.”

Vera took the silence on the other end of the line to mean she could keep speaking.

“Robert and I would like to open a savings account for Rose,” she said. “Start up a university fund for her. She’s been talking recently about attending school, but James said she’s getting discouraged by the cost. Robert and I would be more than happy to help…”

“Listen, I don’t know what you’ve heard, but Rose and I are not a charity case, and we don’t need your money.”

Vera inhaled deeply and swallowed back the retort on her tongue. She should’ve let Robert handle this conversation; he’d always been the patient one.

“I never said we thought you were a charity case,” she said calmly. “And no offense, but this isn’t about you. It’s about Rose, and giving her a chance at a better future. Not that what you’ve done for her hasn’t given her a chance. It’s just… we’d like to help, is all.”

“Why?” Jackie asked. “She’s not your kid.”

“She’s our son’s soulmate,” Vera said simply. “She’s been part of the family for seven years. We love her like she was our own child, and we’d do anything for her.”
“I-I didn’t realize you thought of her like that,” Jackie mumbled, and Vera could hear the trace of wonder and embarrassment in her tone. “Thought she was just another kid to you. One your son happened to be soulbonded to or whatever.”

Vera chuckled softly.

“No, she’s much more than the girl our son is soulmated to,” she said. “She’ll one day be our daughter. A daughter we never had.”

“I never asked,” Jackie said, a little hesitantly, “and Rose never said. Do you have other children, aside from James?”

Vera shook her head as she said, “No. No, just James. Not for lack of trying, though.”

“Oh.”

Vera paused for a moment before steeling herself for what she wanted to say next.

“Robert and I married when I was just twenty years old,” Vera said, remembering back to those carefree days. “He was twenty-one. We were so happy and in love and so excited to start our life together. But we didn’t try to start a family right away. We were both still in school and wanted to wait a little while. We started trying for a baby part way through our doctorate programs. Got pregnant almost right away. Quite lucky, eh? But I lost the baby nearly two months in. Heartbroken, we were. But we moved on and decided to try again. Took a little longer. Over a year. Lost that one too. And the one after that two years later.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Jackie whispered.

Vera swallowed down the lump that always formed in her throat when she thought of her lost babies.

“We nearly called it quits,” Vera admitted. She rubbed at her eyes as she watched out the window where her husband and son worked on building a snowman in the snowstorm that was just beginning to let up. She wouldn’t trade her life as it was for anything, but she still sometimes wondered how different her life would have been if those miscarriages hadn’t happened. “We were both so emotionally exhausted and sick of having our hearts broken. We were both about to have a procedure done to keep us from getting pregnant again, when we realized we were pregnant for a fourth time. You can imagine how wary we were, wondering every morning if this would be the day our baby was taken again. But miraculously he wasn’t. Four pregnancies, but one baby. One beautiful, healthy little boy.”

“I’m so sorry,” Jackie said again, and Vera’s eyes stung at the genuine compassion and empathy in the other woman’s voice.

“I didn’t tell you this to get your sympathies,” Vera said, swiping away an escaped tear. “I told you so you might understand why Robert and I want to do this for Rose. We wanted loads of kids. God, we wanted a house full of them. But it wasn’t meant to be. But now we’ve also got Rose. James’s wasn’t the only life that changed that New Year’s morning. He gained a soulmate, and we gained a daughter. And my husband and I would really love to do this for her. But we won’t if you’re unagreeable.”

Jackie sniffed before she whispered, “Yeah, okay. Thank you. Lord knows I’ve tried my best with Rose. But there are certain things I just can’t do for her.”

“I know,” Vera said softly. “You’ve done wonderfully with her, Jackie. She’s a beautiful girl. We all love her dearly.”
They ended the call shortly afterwards, only moments before the front door banged open.

“Blimey, it’s freezing out!”

Vera smiled as she heard her two favorite boys enter the house. She immediately walked into the kitchen and put a bit of milk into a pan and set it on the stove to make them something hot to warm them up.

She heard familiar footsteps behind her, and squealed when frigid hands snuck under her jumper to press against the skin of her belly.

“Robert!” She spun around and tugged his arms out of her shirt. He was bright-eyed and pink-cheeked and grinning like a little kid. God, she loved this man.

“It’s a bit nippy out,” he said conversationally, reaching behind her to hover his hands over the heating milk.

“Well, it is snowing,” she pointed out, reaching up and cupping his chilly cheeks.

His eyes fluttered shut as he leaned into her warmth and surreptitiously sneaked his hands into the back pockets of her jeans.

“For warmth!” he exclaimed defensively when she told him off, but the waggle of his eyebrows and groping fingers told Vera otherwise.

She rolled her eyes at him and wrapped her arms around his waist and allowed him to nuzzle his cold face into her neck.

They stood in that embrace until the milk started simmering. Robert pulled back and tugged his hands free of her jeans, though not without a quick and playful squeeze that earned him a swat on his chest. He leaned forward as though to press a kiss to her lips, but he hesitated and his eyebrows furrowed as his gaze flickered over her face.

Vera cringed, knowing her eyes were still probably a little red and puffy, and she turned around to tend to the mugs of hot chocolate before the milk scalded.

“Vera, love?” Robert whispered, leaning against the counter as she poured the hot milk.

She sighed and said, “I just spoke to Rose’s mother.”

His eyes hardened. “What did she say to you?”

“Nothing,” Vera promised, stroking his arm softly in reassurance. “She was lovely. But she asked why we were willing to give Rose such a gift, which brought about a conversation about any siblings James had. And… Well… I told her.”

Robert’s face softened and he took Vera’s hands from the cocoa she was mixing to wrap her in his arms. She knew the loss of their babies still broke his heart some days too. She buried her face in his chest and let him hold her as she whispered, “But she’s agreeable to the idea. So we can set up the account whenever.”

“What account?”

Vera stepped out of Robert’s arms as James wandered into the kitchen. She finished adding the peppermint stick to the mugs before she handed one to her son and the other to her husband.
“Nothing, sweetheart,” she said. “Did you two have fun outside?”

“Oh, yes!” James said happily, taking a sip of his drink. “Well, it’s been snowing in Boston for a month now, but still!”

“It’s been ages since I’ve seen a good snow,” Robert said. “Gotta take advantage of it. No snow in sunny California.”

“You’re such a child, Robert,” Vera said fondly as her husband licked chocolate off of his top lip. “You love it,” he retorted with a wink.

“You know it,” she purred.

“Aaaand that’s my cue to leave,” James interrupted. “I’ll be in my room.”

Vera waited until she heard his footsteps retreat up the stairs before she stepped up to Robert and kissed off the smear of chocolate he’d missed on his upper lip, this time encouraging his hands go on a wander around her bum.

oOoOo

“Thanks, Mum,” Rose said as she looked at the start-up makeup kit her mum had gotten for her. “Another lovely Christmas!”

Rose pushed herself up from the floor to give her mum a hug, but Jackie stopped her by handing her a white envelope that had little Christmas trees stamped across the back seal.

“Wait, there’s one more gift for you, sweetheart,”

Rose grabbed it and was surprised to see that the return address was to James’s house. But she’d already received her gift and Christmas card from James and his family…

She tore it open and scrunched her eyes in confusion as she pulled out official bank paperwork and a Christmas card. She opened the card and skimmed over the generic holiday greeting before moving her eyes to the left page of the card and the flowing script written there.

Dearest Rose,

Merry Christmas! We hope this makes you more hopeful about attending university, or anything else you may want to do after school. Remember you can do whatever you set your mind to, so don’t ever let anything stand in your way or let anyone tell you that you can’t.

Love always,

Vera and Robert

Rose turned her attention to the bank statements in her hand, and she read all of the documents carefully as she tried to comprehend what James’s parents had done for her.

“I can’t accept this,” she said to her mum, flipping through the papers with shaking hands.

“It’s a gift,” Jackie said with a small smile. “Their gift to you. They want to do this for you, sweetheart.”

“You knew about this?” Rose asked.
Jackie nodded. “Vera called me last weekend and told me what she and her husband were planning to give you for Christmas. I admit I had the same reaction you did. But they’re nice people. And they care about you and your happiness, sweetheart. And I’m so sorry for how I’ve been treating James. I’ve been a right cow to him while his family has done nothing but love and accept you.”

Rose sniffled back the stinging in her eyes as she walked up to her mum and fell into her arms.

“They’ve still been far too kind,” Rose mumbled, thinking back to five thousand pounds that were in her brand-new savings account.

“Probably,” Jackie agreed. “Make sure you thank them.”

“I will,” Rose said. “Right after breakfast. I’m starved.”

“Hello, my beautiful Rose!” James said happily in greeting. “Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas,” Rose said brightly. “Are your mum and dad there?”

James frowned.

“Ehm, yeah, just a second.” He muffled the phone against his chest as he called his mum and dad out of the kitchen where they were supposedly washing up from breakfast, but James was sure doing dishes didn’t involve all of the low voices and giggling he heard.

His parents emerged bright-eyed and still chuckling, and James rolled his eyes fondly at them. They were so in love, it was ridiculous, and he felt a pang of jealousy and longing as he wished again for these next five years to fly by so he could have that with Rose.

“Rose wants to speak to you,” he said, handing over the phone.

His mum put it on speaker as she and his dad settled onto the sofa. James hesitated for a minute before he pushed himself up off the floor and wandered into the kitchen to freshen up his mug of tea and steal a strip of bacon from the platter.

He put the rest of the food in the fridge and finished up loading the dishwasher, trying not to eavesdrop on the conversation from the living room, but he couldn’t help but be curious as to why Rose wanted to speak to his parents.

“Oh, you’re very welcome, sweetheart,” his mum said, and his heart stuttered at the love he heard in his mum’s voice. He loved that his family loved Rose.

“You’ve been far too generous,” Rose said.

“Nonsense,” his dad said. “This is our gift to you, darling.”

“Well, thanks,” Rose said. “Really. Thank you. I can’t tell you how much this means.”

“We’re happy to do it,” his dad said. His dad’s eyes flickered up and caught James’s gaze, and James’s cheeks heated up when he realized he’d been caught. “Well, your soulmate is hovering by the door and about ready to rip the phone away from us.”

“Am not,” he whined, taking his dad’s hint that he could rejoin them.

Rose giggled and said, “Hello again, James.”
“Am I now worthy of your presence again, Rose?” he teased, turning off the speakerphone and settling into the recliner next to the tree.

“Oh, shut it,” Rose said. “I needed to thank your parents for their gift, is all.”

“Their gift?” James asked, unaware his parents had gotten anything for Rose.

“Yeah, they didn’t tell you?” Rose asked curiously. “They opened up a savings account for me. Uni fund. Put five thousand pounds in it already.”

James glanced towards the kitchen door. They must have taken some of the money they’d set aside for his school tuition and gifted it to Rose. His parents were the most wonderful people on the planet.

“They love you,” James whispered, in awe that he was lucky enough to have such a generous and loving family.

“So they’ve said,” Rose murmured softly. “I love them too. I really can’t want to meet them.”

“Me too,” James said. His stomach bubbled with warmth as he pictured his first Christmas with Rose. She and her mother might come up to Scotland, or he and his parents could travel down to London. It didn’t matter, as long as they were together. He imagined building snowmen and snow forts with Rose, and making Christmas sweets, and decorating a tree, and watching all of the silly Christmas movies together while they curled up with mugs of hot chocolate.

“Well, I guess we’ll have to improvise until then,” he said, infecting a bit of cheer into his tone to rid himself of the melancholy of knowing how long they still had to wait. “Which film are we watching today?”

oOoOo

“Remember when you said I should consider becoming a professor some day?” James asked as the spring semester drew to a close.

Yeah.

“Well, I’m giving it a test run,” he said. “I’ve accepted a tutoring position for the first-year chemistry and calculus classes next autumn. We’ll see how it goes.”

Oh, that’s brilliant! You’ll be brilliant!

And of course, he was brilliant at it.

That fall semester found him spending all of his free time in the library and spare lecture halls with nearly half of the freshmen class who needed his help passing their science and maths classes.

James loved it. He loved working with the students and getting to know new people, and he loved the look the students got when something finally clicked and everything suddenly made a lot more sense.

And that was how James passed his undergraduate career. He tutored and studied and did research for his physics professor. All the while, he took more classes than an average student normally took, and between that and the credits he had entered school with, he was looking at the prospect of graduating a semester early.

“Blimey, I’ve got to think about graduate school,” James said soon after Rose’s fifteenth birthday as
his junior year drew to a close. “If I’m graduating this winter coming. Blimey. That’s a little intimidating, isn’t it?”

“Oh, come off it, you’ll get into any school, no problem,” Rose scoffed. “Where are you looking?”

“Well, for a Master’s degree, I was thinking of staying here in the US,” James said. “MIT, maybe. Dunno. But that’s a two-year program—”

“That you’ll finish in a year,” Rose teased, so proud of James and how brilliant he was and how successful he was.

James chuckled. “Nah, it’s more rigorous. Why rush through it? And also…”

He paused for a moment, wondering if Rose would be agreeable to the plan he had in his head.

“What?”

“Well, I was thinking of moving back to the UK for a doctorate program,” James suggested nonchalantly. Rose was silent, and James continued on in his nervousness. “Well, it’s just that at the rate I’m going, and if all goes according to plan, I’ll finish the Master’s program the winter before your eighteenth birthday. I could, y’know, take a semester off maybe. Move myself back to England. Just in time for your birthday. Maybe. I dunno.”

“You’d—you’d do that?” Rose whispered. “Move back here for me?”

“Of course I would,” he said immediately. “Besides, didn’t you say you were looking at art schools in or near London? London’s full of brilliant doctorate programs for me. Oxford. Cambridge. Loads of schools.”

“God, it’s all getting so real now, isn’t it?” Rose said in awe. “We’re almost there, James. Only three years to go. Two more graduations for you.”

“I know!” James groaned. “I’m going barmy waiting.”

“It’ll be here before we know it,” Rose soothed. “But right now, I’ve got to get going. Sorry, love. I’m going out with a few friends tonight for my birthday.”

James barely bit back a sigh in time. Rose had admitted a few months ago that she’d started going to parties with her friends. James hadn’t been pleased, but ultimately decided he couldn’t keep her from going to them if that was what she chose to do. But he didn’t have to like it. He’d attended a few parties at school and knew how quickly they could spiral out of control.

“Yeah. Okay,” he said a little stiffly. “Be careful.”

“Always am,” she assured. “Please don’t worry about it, James. It’s just a few of us having a few beers in my mate’s basement.”

“Yeah,” James said, not wanting to rehash this old argument. They both knew that most of the parties she went to were often larger than a few people having a few beers.

“I’ll write to you when I get home later,” she promised. “Love you.”

“Love you, too,” he said before hanging up.

He sighed and went back to studying, hoping Rose was doing what she wanted to do rather than what she felt she had to do.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Wherein Rose realizes parties aren’t nearly as fun as they once were.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has a trigger warning for drunkenness and some non-consensual kissing.

Rose stumbled into the kitchen and tossed her empty beer bottle into the garbage, cursing herself the whole time. She’d gone over her self-imposed limit of two drinks, telling herself that “one more wouldn’t hurt”.

Five drinks later, she couldn’t decide if she wanted to yell at herself or go throw up.

“Rosie!”

Jimmy sauntered up to her and chucked his can at the nearly-full garbage bin, only for the can to bounce off the wall and clatter to the floor, spraying droplets of beer everywhere.

He then grabbed a fresh can from the ice bucket and motioned to toss it to her.

“No more for me,” Rose said, hating how wobbly the room already was.

“Aww, c’mon,” Jimmy said, cracking open the can and thrusting it into her hands anyway. “Live a little! You’ve hardly had any.”

“This’ll be my sixth,” Rose protested, setting the can onto the counter. “I can’t.”

“Pfft, I’m already on number nine!” Jimmy said, taking the beer from her and chugging half of it. “C’mon, party killjoy. Let’s dance!”

Rose sighed and let herself be dragged back to the living room of their mutual friend’s house. Jimmy put his hands on her hips and started moving them to the bass beat that was echoing in her chest.

There was no way she could walk home like this yet, so she figured she would dance to a few songs while she sobered up.

But as one song morphed into another and Jimmy finished his purported ninth beer, his hands grew bolder.

“Jimmy, hands to yourself,” she ordered, slapping his hands away as they snuck towards her bum.

“C’mon, Rosie,” Jimmy slurred, grabbing her upper arm to pull her back to him. “I’ll play nice. Promise.”
But his hands continued to wander, and Rose had had enough of this party. That seemed to be the recurring theme of the last few months; she just didn’t enjoy these parties as much as she had when she first started going to them. She would take a night with James over deafening music and cheap beer any day, and she was suddenly struck with the desire to be at home in her pajamas having a movie night.

“S’late,” she said. She stepped away from Jimmy and scanned the room for Shareen to tell her she was leaving. “I should go home.”

“Party’s barely started, babe,” he said, walking backwards with her until Rose’s back was pressed against a wall. “Lot of night left. So much could happen yet.”

He inched closer until the front his trousers brushed against her skirt and Rose went cross-eyed trying to look him in the eye.

“Jimmy, you know I don’t do this,” Rose said, blinking as she tried to get her eyes to focus so she could get out of the cage Jimmy had made around her with his arms. “I’ve got a soulmate.”

“He ain’t here, is he?” Jimmy asked, making a show of looking around at the mass of bodies writhing to the music in the too-small area. “What he don’t know can’t hurt him.”

“I can’t,” Rose insisted, giving his chest a little shove.

“Don’t be like that. Besides, you don’t want to be completely unpracticed when you finally meet him, do you?” Jimmy leered. “Gotta know how to pleasure him how he’s used to. Gotta learn to suck a dick and fuck one and make it feel so good.”

“Jimmy, enough,” Rose said. “You’re drunk.”

“Nah, I’m just feeling good,” Jimmy said, leaning closer to her until she could smell the acrid scent of alcohol on his breath and until his hips were flush against hers. “About to feel really good soon.”

He dropped his hands to her waist and started up a slow grind against her, and Rose shuddered when she felt something firm growing against her hip.

“He’s probably been with dozens of girls while he waits for you to grow up,” he whispered into her ear. “Why shouldn’t you be allowed to have a bit of fun?”

“James hasn’t… he wouldn’t…”

“If that’s what he told you, he lied, Rosie. He’s a bloke, and all blokes do it.” Jimmy started trailing his lips down the slope of her neck before latching onto the side of her throat. His teeth nipped at her neck and Rose gasped at the sting and at the throbbing heat in the skin beneath his mouth.

Rose shivered as a chill of goosebumps broke out across her skin and her stomach clenched in discomfort. No, no, no, this was all wrong.

Warm, wet lips crept up her jaw before finally settling across her lips. She tasted stale beer and cigarettes as a tongue swept across her bottom lip. Hands dropped to her bum and started squeezing far too roughly and his hips were still rubbing against hers and this was all wrong! Her first kiss was supposed to be with James!

Rose yanked her head away from the mouth that had her lips locked in a sloppy kiss, and she used her leverage against the wall to shove Jimmy away from her. He stumbled back a few steps looking a little dazed and flushed, but Rose turned her back to him and made her way towards the front door,
ignoring the curses and insults he was yelling at her.

The room was spinning and her legs felt like lead, and she was amazed that she managed to coordinate her body enough to get outside. The cold air stung her cheeks and made her stomach roil. Tears burned her eyes and her chest felt so tight she could hardly breathe.

She just made out with Jimmy Stone. She snogged someone who wasn’t her soulmate.

A sob tore up her throat as she shakily sat down on the damp grass, dry heaving until she threw up. Oh, God, what had she done? James was going to hate her. Nothing could fix this. He’d never talk to her again.

She stumbled to her feet when the grass became too cold and wet to stay sitting on, and she blindly started making her way home.

The streets were so familiar she could walk them in her sleep, which was what it felt like. Her brain didn’t process her surroundings, and she didn’t even try. All she could think about was how much she wanted to be at home in her own bed in soft, dry clothing and talking to James.

She finally made it home and managed to stay quiet enough that she didn’t wake her mum. She latched the door to her bedroom and stripped off her clothes. They reeked of alcohol and sweat and cigarettes, making Rose’s stomach churn once more.

She changed into new knickers and a pair of soft pajama bottoms and a long-sleeve t-shirt before curling up in bed. Tears stung her eyes as she blindly rooted around under her pillow for a pen, but she stopped looking before she found one. What was she even supposed to say? She didn’t deserve to talk to him right now, but oh, how she wanted to. He always made her feel better, and she needed him right now. But she didn’t deserve him, not now, not ever. Not after she made out with someone else.

The floodgates opened, and she wrapped herself around her pillow as her body convulsed with sobs.

She eventually calmed enough to fall asleep, and was awoken the next morning by her mum banging around the flat.

Rose groaned as she sat up, wanting to snap at her mum to be quiet. But then she caught sight of the pile of clothes on the floor, and the memories of the previous night came rushing back to her. She dug the heels of her hands into her eyes. What the hell had she done? She’d mucked it all up. She just ruined everything with James. Ten years of building a relationship with him, and she’d destroyed it all in one night.

Rose was so angry with herself, and so disgusted. What the hell was wrong with her?

She climbed out of bed and crept across the hall to the bathroom. She turned the shower water as hot as she could stand it and stood under the steaming spray until it went cool.

When she joined her mother in the kitchen, Jackie said, “Oh, finally got up, did you?”

“Don’t feel good,” Rose mumbled, pouring herself a cup of tea and sticking a piece of bread in the toaster.

“Yeah, that happens when you party all night,” Jackie said, a harsh edge creeping into her tone.

Rose knew she should be embarrassed that she’d been caught, but there was no way her mum could make her feel worse than she already did, and so she said nothing. Which only irritated Jackie
“Nothing?” she demanded. “You’re not going to say anything?”

“What’s the point?” Rose snapped, slathering butter over her toast with more force than necessary. “Want me to lie?”

Jackie didn’t say anything, but looked Rose up and down for a moment, before her eyes widened.

“Rose, what happened?” she demanded.

Rose furrowed her brow as her heart accelerated. Was it that obvious she had cheated on James?

“I don’t…”

Jackie walked up to her and pulled down the collar of her shirt, and Rose’s legs went numb. A hickey. Jimmy must’ve left a bloody hickey! Rose gripped the counter with shaking hands and she squeezed her eyes shut against her spotty vision.

“Rose? Sweetheart?”

Jackie rubbed her hand up and down Rose’s arm, and her emotions broke once more.

“I fucked up, Mum,” Rose sobbed. She turned into her mother’s waiting arms and buried her face in her mother’s shoulder. “I fucked it all up! Everything! And I didn’t mean to! God, I didn’t mean to! I didn’t want to! I tried to tell him to stop and he wouldn’t listen and he kept kissing me and…”

Jackie’s eyes widened in fear as she pulled back from Rose to look her in the eye.

“Rose, sweetheart, were you… Did someone force you to have sex with them?”

Rose’s breath hitched as she shook her head.

“Oh, thank God,” Jackie breathed.

“But I still snogged him!” Rose cried. “I snogged another bloke! James is going to hate me!”

Jackie wrapped her arms around her daughter as she sobbed harder.

“Shhh,” she whispered. “Breathe, sweetheart.”

Jackie rubbed Rose’s back for several minutes before her sobs dissolved into snifflles.

“How about a fresh cuppa? Then we can sit down and you can tell me what happened,” Jackie suggested.

Rose nodded and settled down at the kitchen table. She grabbed a tissue and blotted her eyes before blowing her nose as her mum fixed up a fresh cup of tea and toast.

When Jackie joined her again, Rose told her all about the party—and all the ones she’d been going to for the last nine months—and about Jimmy Stone and how he had cornered her against the wall and started kissing her.

“And what did James have to say about all of this?” Jackie asked when Rose stopped speaking.

Rose mumbled something to her lap as she tore her tissue into little pieces.
“What?”

“I said I haven’t told him yet,” Rose said. She set the pieces of her tissues on the table and instead began to tug at the sleeves of her jumper, wringing the soft fabric around her hands.

“Sweetheart, I think you should tell him.”

“Tell him what?” Rose said angrily. “‘So guess what I did, last night? I fucked another boy. Sorry about that. I still love you though and can’t wait to meet you in 816 days.’”

“You listen to me, Rose Tyler,” her mum said firmly. “You did not shag another boy. Not even close.”

“I made out with one though,” Rose mumbled miserably.

“Did you want to?” Jackie asked.

“What?”

“Did you want to make out with him?” she repeated.

“No, why would you even think—?”

Jackie sat back in her seat and nodded resolutely. “Well there we are, then. Rose, you didn’t want any of it to happen. That boy took advantage of you. He ought to be ashamed of himself. He ought to be arrested!”

“But I still did it,” Rose murmured, clutching the sleeves of her jumper tightly.

“No, you didn’t,” Jackie said gently. “It happened to you. And I’ll bet next month’s rent that James will understand that, and that he won’t hold it against you. He’ll probably be angry—”

“He should be angry,” Rose interrupted.

“Not at you, sweetheart, at the situation, and at that bloody boy, Jimmy Stone. Wouldn’t put it past him to come over here and give Jimmy Stone a piece of his mind.”

Rose rolled her eyes and snorted.

“Talk to him, sweetheart,” Jackie said softly.

“What if you’re wrong?” Rose whispered, nibbling at her bottom lip. “What if you’re wrong and James is upset with me?”

“Then I’ll be flying to Boston or wherever he is and I’ll be giving him a piece of my mind,” Jackie said. “But I don’t think I’ll need to.”

Jackie stood and cleared up Rose’s untouched breakfast before making her daughter another cup of tea.

“I’ll be in the living room if you need me, sweetheart.”

Rose let out a shaky breath as she took her tea and headed back to her bedroom.

She sat on her bed for several minutes as she tried to gather the courage to roll up her sleeves and talk to him.
She finally pushed up the fabric of her jumper, and her face paled when she saw his writing.

*Did you make it home okay last night?*

*I’m hoping you did and are safe and sound and asleep in your bed…*

*Seriously, Rose, are you okay?*

Off to a fan-fucking-tastic start, she thought as she grabbed a pen and wrote, “Yeah, I’m fine.”

His reply was almost instantaneous, and Rose furrowed her brow as she checked her clock. It was 10am; he should be asleep.

*Thank God! Blimey, Rose, don’t do that to me.*

“You should be in bed.”

*Well. I technically am.*

Rose rolled her eyes. “Asleep.”

*Been in and out all night. Couldn’t sleep.*

Rose nodded at her arm. She wanted to talk to him, and tell him what happened, but the words weren’t coming, and she should really let him try and get more sleep, and so she just stared at her arm.

*Everything okay?*

And there it was. She couldn’t lie to him.

“Not really,” she admitted.

*Want to talk about it? I can phone you, if you’d like?*

“No, I don’t… I’d rather talk like this, if that’s okay?” she asked. She didn’t want to hear the disappointment and heartbreak in his voice when she told him what she’d done.

*Of course.*

Rose inhaled a deep breath and took a sip of her tepid tea, and managed to lose her nerve.

“It can wait,” she said. “You should go to bed. Sorry.”

*Nope, I’m wide awake, Rose Tyler.*

After a few seconds, he hastily scribbled, *That’s not to say you have to tell me what’s wrong. No pressure. Up to you. But I’m here if you want me to be.*

Rose sighed and set her half-empty mug on her bedside table before she hugged a pillow to her chest.

“I went to a party last night,” she said, though James already knew that. She knew he didn’t like it, but he’d come to accept that was what she wanted to do. Though she didn’t particularly want to anymore. The thought of alcohol and hot, sweaty bodies all dancing too close together made her shudder in disgust.
Did something happen? Are you okay?

“Yeah,” she wrote.

Yeah, something happened? Or yeah, you’re okay?

Rose snorted mirthlessly at her arm.

“Yeah, something happened,” she replied. “I made a huge mistake and you’re soulmated to the biggest idiot on the planet. I’m so sorry, James. I didn’t mean for it to happen and I didn’t want it to happen, but I made out with a boy at the party. I’m so sorry and I know that’s a lame excuse but it’s all I’ve got and I’m so angry at myself. And I know you probably hate me now, and you should, because I’ve just ruined everything. I’m so sorry, James.”

Rose was crying again by this point as she took up most of her left forearm arm with her words. She buried her face into her pillow and screamed. She was so stupid for messing up the best thing that had ever happened to her. Two more years to go until she could meet him, and she fucked it all up.

“Rose, sweetheart?”

Rose turned her head to look at her mum and tell her to piss off, she wasn’t in the mood for company, but the words died in her throat when she saw the phone her mum had pressed to her shoulder.

“That better not be…”

“It’s James,” her mum said, walking into the room with the phone outstretched.

But Rose stared at it then down at her arm. She said she didn’t want to talk to him on the phone!

“Take it, Rose,” Jackie urged softly.

Rose grumbled under her breath, and took the phone. She muffled it against her bed until her mum left her room and latched the door behind her. She sighed and kneaded her fist into her forehead as she swore at herself under her breath.

She picked up the phone with a sigh and held it to her ear.

“It wasn’t enough for you to write and say how angry and disappointed and whatever the fuck else you are, you had to tell me?” she snapped, her breath hitching as she swiped at her eyes.

“Rose, love…”

“Don’t call me that,” she hiccupped. “I’m not your love. Not after what I did to you. Fuck! I’m so sorry, James. I’m so sorry!”

“Rose, love, breathe,” he murmured softly.

Rose gasped in a breath and tried to match her inhales with when he told her he should be inhaling. After a minute, her vision stopped going spotty.

“Now I want you to listen to me,” James said, but he didn’t sound upset or angry or anything he should be. “It wasn’t your fault. All right? It wasn’t your fault. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I snogged another bloke!” Rose cried. “I didn’t mean to! It all happened so fast and I couldn’t make him stop!”

Did something happen? Are you okay?

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Yeah, something happened? Or yeah, you’re okay?

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“I snogged another bloke!” Rose cried. “I didn’t mean to! It all happened so fast and I couldn’t make him stop!”
“Rose. Rose, breathe,” he said again, and this time there was an edge of something tense in his tone. “Rose, it wasn’t your fault. I’m not angry with you. I’m not upset. Well, yes, I am, but not at you. Never at you. I love you so much, Rose. Someone took advantage of you, and that thought makes me sick. To know someone did that to you, to my soulmate, and has made you this upset, it makes me very much want to fly to London and give this Jimmy Stone bloke a piece of my mind.”

Rose giggled out a hiccup. That was what her mum said he’d do.

Wait…

“How’d you know his name?” Rose asked.

“Ehm…” James sounded uncomfortable all of a sudden as he blurted out, “I didn’t know what was happening but I knew you were upset and I couldn’t stand the thought of it and I called you without thinking but your mum answered and she seemed to think I’d be angry at you? Why would I be angry at you? You’re my precious Rose! But anyway, she lectured me for a good five minutes before I could even get a word in edgewise that I had no clue what was going on except that something happened to you and I really needed to hear your voice. And so she told me a little bit of what happened and threatened me not to yell at you or make you cry. And here we are, and you’re crying, and I just want to fix it, Rose, how can I fix it? I’ll do anything to make you feel better. I can come castrate this Jimmy Stone bloke. Though that’d probably make me feel better instead of you, wouldn’t it?”

Rose’s giggles turned into hysterical laughter until she couldn’t tell whether she was crying or laughing.

“Oh, Rose, I’m sorry,” James said.

“Why’re you apologizing?” Rose demanded. “I’m the one that bloody ruined everything!”

“No, you didn’t,” he said firmly. “I promise you, you didn’t. You were taken advantage of. My heart is breaking for you, Rose, and it hurts that you think I would think any less of you—hate you—just because of this. But, ehm, I hope you know that, ehm, if-if you did want to, ehm, to, y’know, do that, it’s okay. Yeah? It’s okay. We’re thousands of miles apart and can’t see each other for another 814 days…”

“Wait, it’s 14?” Rose looked over at her countdown and tried to figure out where she’d lost two days. “Huh. I had 816.”

James was silent on the other end of the line, and Rose’s brain finally caught up with what he’d been saying.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “Oh, God, you know I wouldn’t! You’re the only one for me, James. Ever. I don’t want anyone except you.”

James breathed a sigh of relief, and Rose once more felt exceedingly guilty that she had the texture of another man’s lips on hers before James’s. And she was suddenly angry, too. How dare Jimmy bloody Stone steal her first kiss from James.

“Always wanted my first kiss to be with you,” she mumbled angrily.

“Me, too,” he admitted, and her belly plummeted. “But, maybe we still can?”

“How? I fucked it up.”
“Stop saying that,” he chastised. “You didn’t fuck anything up. What I was going to say was that your first kiss doesn’t count. If I’m understanding everything correctly—and, please, correct me if I’m wrong—you weren’t exactly a willing, consenting participant.”

“I wasn’t!” she said vehemently. “Please, believe me! I didn’t want it to happen.”

“I believe you, love,” James said softly. “And Rose, you’re proving my point and disproving yours. You didn’t want it to happen. So you can’t say you ruined anything. Okay? It just…happened. And I’m furious at that boy for touching you without your permission. But Rose, please believe me. None of this was your fault. Okay? I don’t blame you. I’m not angry or upset with you. And I am still very much excited to meet you in 814 days.”

Rose relaxed back against her pillows and whispered, “Me too.”

“God, I wish we could meet right now,” James groaned. “It’s killing me to hear you so upset and I can’t do a bloody thing.”

“You’re helping,” she promised. “You’re helping a lot. I still feel like shit, but you’ve helped.”

“Good,” he said. “Not that you still feel poorly. But that I helped. And are we in agreement that your first kiss hasn’t happened yet? That it doesn’t count? You weren’t willing and a kiss takes two people.”

Rose smiled for the first time since the party.

“Yeah, I can agree to that,” Rose whispered,

“Brilliant!” James said. “Because I refuse to let someone like Jimmy bloody Stone ruin anything for us.”

Rose giggled in relief.

“Our first kiss is going to be the kiss of a lifetime, Rose Tyler! Unforgettable! I’ve got plans, you see.”

“You have, have you?” Warmth bubbled up in her chest and cleared out the anxiety and heartache that had been sitting there for the past ten hours.

“Oh, yes!” he exclaimed. “I’m going to wine and dine you. Woo you like no one has ever been wooed before. I’ll take you out to dinner and we’ll dance under the starlight.”

“You think you’re so impressive,” she teased, not wanting to admit to him that his plans really did sound romantic. His ego was large enough as it was.

“I am so impressive!” James boasted, and Rose could hear the smile in his voice. “Just you wait, Rose Tyler, because you and I are going to be absolutely fantastic.”
Happy GRAD-uation James! I'm so proud of you!

James grinned at his arm as he swung his tassel around on his finger. He was in the car with his parents, having just gotten out of his graduation ceremony, and they were about to go out for a celebratory dinner.

“Thanks!” James wrote. “Now for a month’s break before my Master’s program—”

The car abruptly decelerated, sending James jolting forward and creating a long smear of ink on his forearm.

A car horn blared and James looked up to see another car was about an inch in front of theirs, having tried to make a cross-lane turn despite not having the right-of-way.

“Everyone okay?” his dad asked a little tightly, his arm still thrown out in front of Vera’s chest.

“Yeah,” James said, watching the other driver—who couldn’t have been older than eighteen—make lewd hand gestures and continue his turn.

“Blimey,” Vera breathed. “That boy could’ve done some serious damage! He ought to have his license revoked! Did anyone get his plate numbers?”

“We’re fine, darling,” Robert said softly, slowly creeping through the intersection and to the next red light. “Everyone’s okay. No damage done.”

Vera huffed out a breath, but took Robert’s proffered hand and gave it a squeeze.

“Half a second more and he would’ve hit your side of the car,” Vera murmured, rubbing her thumb across Robert’s. “Yours and James’s.” She glanced back at him, and James gave her a reassuring smile. “Dunno what I’d do without the two of you.”

“Dunno what I’d do either, love,” Robert said, brushing a kiss to her knuckles. “But thankfully we don’t have to worry about that. Not for a very long while.”

James, meanwhile, found the pen that had flown to the floor and returned his attentions to his arm.

James, are you okay? What happened??

“Sorry, had a bit of a near-miss with an auto accident,” he explained.

What?? Are you okay?!
“We’re fine, love,” he soothed. “Wanker teenager doesn’t know how to drive.”

_Bloody idiot! He could’ve killed you! And your parents!_

“You sound like my mum.”

_It’s true though! It’s upsetting that the stupid, reckless decisions of someone else could have such a huge impact on someone else’s life!

“I know,” he said. “But all we can control are our own actions. And our reactions to others.”

_I just can’t bear the thought of something happening to you. Not now, not ever._

“I know. I feel the same way. But can we please talk about something else?” he begged. “This is getting too depressing for me. We’re all fine. And this is a night of celebration!”

_Quite right! I’m so incredibly proud of you, James. I wish I could’ve been there for you._

“Oh, you didn’t miss much,” he assured. “Stuffy old ceremony. Loads of boring speakers. Loads of graduates. Having you to chat to during the ceremony was more than enough.”

_Just one more graduation I’ll miss. But I promise I’ll be there when you get your doctorate. Me and your mum and dad._

James hummed happily at the mental image of seeing Rose next to his parents in the crowd as he defended his thesis in five or so years. Nothing would make him prouder than to see his soulmate as he finished up his final degree and to have her beside him to celebrate.

“I look forward to it,” he said, absolutely aching for these next two years to go by quickly.

_oOoOo_

_Sixteen perfect roses for my perfect Rose on her sixteenth birthday. A very happy birthday to you, my love, and to many more to come. Love, James._

Rose grinned at the familiar sentiment before she held up the vase of flowers so her mum could take the annual photo.

“And this came for you, too,” Jackie said, handing Rose a heavy, rectangular box.

Rose saw it was from Robert and Vera, and she furrowed her eyebrows as she inspected the box that had the image of a laptop computer printed on the side.

“They didn’t!” Rose breathed, cutting into the box to pull out the laptop she had been admiring in the advertisements for the last month. She’d been meaning to buy herself a laptop for when she started her A-Levels, using the savings account Vera and Robert had been building for her over the last four years.

Rose lifted the sleek-looking laptop out of the box carefully, as though even the pressure of her fingertips would do damage to the computer.

She set the computer to the side and lifted out the user manual to scan all of the features, but a card was thrust into her hands next. Rose recognized the flowing script and she ripped open the envelope to reveal a birthday card.

_Dearest Rose,_
We hope you don't mind, but for this birthday we decided that instead of money, we would gift you a computer before you start A-Levels next semester. Graphic design and art is certainly easier with a high-performance computer. We know you’ll do brilliantly, and we are so proud of you. We’re almost there, darling, and we can’t wait to meet you in person.

Love always,

Vera and Robert

“They are far too generous,” Rose said as she once more began skimming all of the functions and features of her new computer.

“They love you,” Jackie said simply.

There were still some days when her feelings of inadequacy reared their ugly heads, but Jackie had gotten to the point where she was happy that James’s parents doted on Rose in all the ways Jackie wished she could. She was pleased that Rose was getting all of the opportunities to better herself and her life, particularly her education, and she was so grateful for James and his family.

Having known what Robert and Vera were giving Rose, Jackie’s gift to her daughter had been wireless internet so she could use her laptop in her bedroom, where Rose spent the rest of the week playing with her new computer and learning the various functions it had.

So, that birthday gift you got from my parents, James mentioned that weekend. Your laptop has a webcam, you know.

“Does it?” Rose said, grinning at her arm as she immediately caught on to what James was saying.

Yep! And as it happens, mine does too.

“What a coincidence!” Rose said.

We could take advantage of those webcams? Have a video chat? If you want?

Rose was already signing up for a Skype account as they spoke.

“Hmm… what sort of username would you recommend for Skype?”

RoseTylerIsTheBest.

Rose rolled her eyes at him.

“Nutter,” Rose said fondly, scanning her room for other ideas.


Rose stared at her arm, her belly flipping pleasantly at his last suggestion.

Hmm, perhaps that’s too presumptive? We could always hyphenate. Tyler-McCrimmon sounds much nicer. And now you won’t have to change it down the road. Just being practical.

Rose was still reeling from seeing his last name as hers. She logically knew that the progression of their relationship would very likely continue into marriage. And yet having him confirm it sent warm pulses of happiness and anticipation deep into her belly.
They were so close now. Less than two years to go. God, she wanted to meet him in real life. She never knew it was possible to love someone so much that it caused an actual ache in her chest, and she knew that love would only grow deeper once they met and started their lives together. Like the Millers down the hall. They’d been married for almost forty years now, and Rose could see how utterly in love they still were with each other.

She desperately wanted that with James. She didn’t want their movie nights to be separated by three thousand miles, or for a random delivery man to give her her birthday flowers, or to drain the phone battery because she and James could never have a quick conversation. She wanted to wake up every morning and have him be the first person she saw, and then be the last person she saw before she went to bed. She wanted to cuddle up next to him as he watched a chick flick with her because she had sat through a science fiction film with him. She wanted the feeling of his hand in hers, and his lips on hers, and to know if his hair was as soft as it looked.

Rose? I was joking. Well, sort of. We don’t have to get married if you don’t want to. I just thought that maybe, one day—

Rose immediately snapped out of her daydream to stop him from convincing himself that she didn’t actually want a romantic relationship with him.

“I do,” she said. “I really do. I was just caught off-guard, is all. You know I love you with all that I am, James. And despite that, I was surprised to see your last name as mine. A good surprised, though. Rose Tyler-McCrimmon. Or Rose McCrimmon-Tyler. Either way. Looks lovely, doesn’t it?”

Yeah, it does. And so does James Tyler-McCrimmon, don’t you think?

“You’d change your last name too?” Rose asked, surprised.

If you’re willing to change your last name, it’s only fair that I meet you halfway, isn’t it?

Rose grinned happily for a moment as she finished setting up the account.

“What’s your username?” she asked.

NotAnMD-Doctor.

She found him and sent him a friend request, and grinned when he immediately accepted it, followed shortly by a notification that NotAnMD-Doctor was sending her a video chat invitation.

Butterflies arose in Rose’s stomach as she fluttered her hands around her hair and shirt. She was in her pajamas fresh from the shower with no makeup on.

The suspense is killing me…

Rose rolled her eyes at his impatience and decided it didn’t matter what she looked like. This was James.

She tapped her fingers against her thigh and clicked the ‘accept call’ button. Her screen flickered for a second, then his face was in her monitor.

“Rose!” he said happily, grinning brightly.

“Hi, James,” she said, returning his smile.
Her eyes roamed over his face, tracing the path of freckles across his nose and cheeks then down his dark stubble and across the graceful curve of his jaw. He was wearing a pair of glasses that Rose had never seen before, but she thought they suited him well. God, he was beautiful.

Rose then saw his lips press into a smug smile.

“You think I’m beautiful?” he asked, waggling his eyebrows at her.

Rose’s cheeks flamed when she realized she had spoken aloud. But there was no point in denying it now.

“Yeah, you are,” she said.

“So are you,” James said, his eyes flickering over the screen. “So beautiful. The most beautiful soulmate anyone has ever had.”

Rose snorted and rolled her eyes even as a hot flush of pride swelled through her at his compliment.

“Oh, shut it.”

“You are,” he insisted. “I’m the luckiest bloke in the world.”

“Hmm, quite right,” Rose teased, grinning at him.

His face slackened and his eyes dropped down to her mouth, where her tongue was resting between her teeth. His Adam’s apple bobbed as his own tongue poked out to wet his lips. Rose ached with the desire to nibble on his bottom lip and dig her hands into that gorgeously-tousled hair of his.

James coughed loudly and scrubbed his hand across the back of his neck as his cheeks pinkened.

“Ehm,” he said, tugging at his hair as he blinked rapidly in quick succession. “So, ehm, how are you this weekend, Rose Tyler? Oh! I finally got a subscription for Netflix. We can stream films a little more easily for movie nights. What do you say we try it out tonight? I’ve bookmarked a few films that looked interesting. But you can peruse the site and bookmark anything that piques your interest. Then we can decide on one after dinner. That sound all right?”

“It’s a date,” she announced, grinning when his cheeks pinkened again. “How can I access Netflix?”

“Oh! Here, let me just…” He looked around for a moment before he leaned out of frame and reappeared a moment later with a pen. He pushed up the sleeves of the jumper he was wearing, exposing his (rather attractive) forearms. “And there’s the account info for you,” he said a few seconds later when he stopped writing. “Feel free to use it whenever you want. You can make your own profile and save whichever films or televisions shows you like. It’s a brilliant site. Dunno why it’s taken me so long to get it.”

They chatted until Jackie knocked on Rose’s door to call her to dinner. She spared a glance at James before she said, “Now I don’t want anything inappropriate going on over this video chat. You’re still only sixteen, Rose.”

James went completely red and started spluttering out syllables that were meant to form words, and Rose felt her cheeks heat up uncomfortably. But she saw the teasing glint in her mum’s eye and she rolled her eyes.

“Right, I’ve got to go,” Rose said, saving James from having to respond to her mother. “Talk to you after dinner. Pick a film for us, love. Bye.”
Rose closed her laptop and followed her mum into the kitchen.

“Thanks for that,” she said dryly, scooping lasagna onto a plate.

“It’s so easy to rile him up,” Jackie said. “I dunno how you can resist. But in all seriousness, Rose, please don’t let me catch you and him sexting or something over the webcam.”

“Ew! Mum!”

“I’m just saying!” Jackie said, holding her hands up placatingly.

“Don’t worry, James can hardly talk about kissing me without stuttering,” Rose said, remembering back to a conversation they’d had when she admitted she was looking forward to a more physical progression of their relationship. He’d seemed to choke on his tongue and splutter out an agreement, hastily followed by a stern reminder that she was still a minor and it was inappropriate for him to be having those kinds of thoughts about her.

“All the same,” Jackie said. “Just be smart, sweetheart.”

oOoOo

James erased the number 366 and wrote 365 instead. This was it. The Final Countdown. 365 more days until he could officially meet his soulmate. And yet it felt like he had never been farther from her. This year was bound to drag.

And so he began celebrating their lasts.

“Last birthday we’ll spend apart, love! Happy 17th!”

“Last summer solstice apart!”

“Last autumnal equinox apart!”

(Last birthday apart! Happy Birthday, James!)

They amused themselves by finding a new last for each other, including Googling to find the most obscure and bizarre daily holidays to help pass the time.

(“Last Reptile Awareness Day, Rose!”)

Soon, all of James and Rose’s application deadlines were upon them as they both applied to schools in and around London.

She had applied to a few of the schools James had applied to, but most of them didn’t have an art program for her. So she was surprised when, a few weeks after the holidays and his graduation from his Master’s program, Rose came home one night to a rather thick envelope from Oxford, the school James had committed to earlier that month. Rose ripped it open and immediately saw the word “congratulations”.

She looked at the acceptance letter in disbelief. She’d only applied on a whim…

“James, guess what?” she said with trembling hands. She flipped rapidly through the papers, wondering if maybe the administration had made a mistake and mailed someone else’s acceptance letter to her.

What?
“So I never told you I applied to Oxford,” she began.

*You did? Why didn’t you say something? I could’ve said something to the admissions department or something. Put in a good word for you.*

“Well, that was one of the reasons I didn’t say anything,” Rose said with a grimace. “I wanted to get into a school on my own, without any briberies.”

*It’s not bribery, per se… It’s more of a character testament.*

“Well, turns out I didn’t need it,” Rose said. “I got in.”

The phone started ringing a second later, and she grinned as she skipped towards it.

She’d barely gotten a hello out when James shouted, “I’m so proud of you, Rose! Oh, that’s fantastic!! You are so brilliant, love, so brilliant!”

“Thanks,” Rose said, giggling at his enthusiasm.

“I still can’t believe you didn’t tell me,” he said, feigning affront.

“I didn’t think I’d get in,” Rose said honestly.

“You ought to have more confidence in yourself, love,” he said. “You are so brilliant and I wish you could see it.”

An extended moment of silence passed before James spoke again.

“Do you think you’ll accept?” he finally asked. “Oxford, that is? Or did you like another school better?”

“I think I will accept this, yeah,” she said. “Sounds so pretentious, doesn’t it? Telling people I go to Oxford.”

“Brilliant, isn’t it,” James laughed. “I loved doing that with MIT.”

They lapsed into silence once more. Rose heard James take in a breath, as though he wanted to start a new sentence, but nothing was forthcoming. He did this twice more and Rose was about to ask him if he was okay when he finally spoke.

“So, ehm, we haven’t really discussed anything about this,” he said, and Rose was surprised to hear a quiver of nervousness in his voice. “But since we’ll be attending the same school, it might make sense to live near the campus. There are some great two-bedroom flats in the area. Not too terribly expensive. In town, too, so lots of good little shops to, you know, shop. Quite nice, really. And, well, I was wondering if you might want to share? With me?”

“Of course,” Rose said immediately, a giddy grin stealing over her lips.

“You do?” James asked hopefully. “You do! Brilliant!”

“Why were you so nervous to ask me?” she asked curiously. “You’re my soulmate, James, and I don’t ever want you to doubt my feelings for you. You’re my very best friend and I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

For once, she was the one convincing him of her undying devotion to him, and the role reversal felt a little odd. But she knew this needed saying before they met each other in a few months.
“I know,” he said quietly. “I just... does this ever feel like one great big dream to you? Like this is too good to be true and you’ll wake up one day and realize none of it was real?”

“Nope,” she said firmly. “My dreams could never make me feel as happy as I am when I’m talking to you.”

He let out that high-pitched happy humming noise that Rose loved so much before he said, “Me too. Thanks, Rose.”

“Anytime,” she said earnestly.

He then huffed out a sigh and moaned, “God, is it April yet? I want to see you.”

“You see me every week,” she reminded, despite the pit of impatience in her gut.

“No,” he said. “And every day. It’s daft, I know, but I can’t wait to share the little things with you. Like cooking together, or taking a walk in the park, or even doing the bloody dishes together.”

“That’s not daft at all,” Rose said gently, her heart stuttering when she heard the soft yearning in his voice. “I can’t wait to share all of this with you, James. But we’re almost there. We can do this, love. 102 days left to go.”

“About to be 101,” James said, reminding Rose of how late it was getting. “Off to bed, love. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Right,” she sighed. Hanging up a call with James was getting harder and harder as they approached her birthday. “Night. Love you.”

“And I love you,” he replied. “And Rose? Congratulations on getting into Oxford. I am so very proud of you, love.”

Rose’s eyes prickled at the praise, and she smiled before hanging up.

The next couple months passed in a blur for both of them. James was busy packing up his apartment in Boston and searching for a flat for the two of them near Oxford. He had found a cozy flat a few blocks from the school, and after getting Rose’s approval, they started working on the paperwork for the lease.

Rose, meanwhile, was busy studying for her exams. She had arranged to wrap up her schooling early and sit for the exams the week before her birthday so that she didn’t have to worry about studying while meeting James.

As her exam dates grew nearer, part of her was ecstatic that it meant she was so close to meeting James while another part of her screamed with anxiety that she wasn’t prepared for the exams. And on top of her test anxiety, she was beginning to worry about renting and paying for a flat.

Rose stared at the lengthening list of supplies they would need, from furniture to utensils to tools to decorations. She had taken a break from studying to IM James in hopes he would ease her test anxieties, but him making a list of supplies for their new flat hadn’t helped at all.

Rose was suddenly reminded of the financial disparities between her and James. If his parents hadn’t been gifting her money every year for Christmas and her birthday, it was likely she wouldn’t even be able to afford uni. And it wasn’t as though she was a great student; she would probably fail out after
the first semester and would have wasted everyone’s money and been such a disappointment.

Defeat and embarrassment washed over her, and she slammed the lid of her laptop closed. She couldn’t do this. She barely had enough in her bank account to cover tuition and monthly rent payments. She should call the university and cancel her enrollment and start looking for a job so she could actually afford the flat with James instead of living off of his and his parents’ charity like she’d been doing for the past five years.

Her eyes stung as feelings of inadequacy she hadn’t felt in years roiled through her. She dragged her hands across her face and caught a glimpse of fresh ink on her arm.

You okay? You left our chat rather abruptly.

“I can’t do this,” she scribbled with trembling hands. “This was a mistake. I can’t go to uni. Or get a flat with you. I’m sorry.”

What? Why? What do you mean? I thought you wanted to live together?

“I do,” she said, swallowing the ache of tears in her throat. “But I’m not cut out for uni. I’m hardly passing now and this whole thing is just going to be a waste of time and money and I can’t do it. And I can’t afford any of this, James. I hardly have enough to cover rent, let alone enough to furnish a flat. ”

Rose, love, don’t worry about it.

“Easy for you to say!”

I mean it. I’ve got us covered.

“I don’t need your charity, James!”

It’s not charity. Hang on…

The telephone started ringing in the kitchen, and Rose trudged out to get it.

“Yeah?”

“It’s not charity, but first off, hello Rose!”

Rose could hear the giddy grin in his voice, and she couldn’t help but smile back, a tiny piece of her foul mood evaporating.

“Hello James,” she said. “And yes, it is, and it’s embarrassing.”

“What do you envision us doing when we finally meet?” James asked suddenly. “So we’ll meet in only four weeks—I can’t wait!—and then what? Dating?”

“I suppose,” Rose said, wondering what he was getting at.

“And then?” he pressed. “Do you picture us getting married some day?”

“Yeah.”

“And when we get married, you’ll have legal rights to everything I own,” he said. “And vice versa. So what’s the problem with me sharing my funds with you a few years in advance?”
Rose huffed out a frustrated breath.

“It’s different,” she argued.

“It’s really not, love,” he said gently. “What’s mine is yours. Has been since that New Year’s Day when you marked me as yours and I marked you as mine.”

“You’re so sappy,” Rose giggled.

“You love it,” he preened.

“Yeah,” she whispered.

“So does this mean you’ll stop worrying about getting a flat and furnishing it?” he asked.

“Nope,” Rose said. “But for you, I’ll try.”

“Good,” he said. “And don’t think I didn’t notice… why are you suddenly so doubtful about succeeding at Oxford? You got in, didn’t you?”

“God knows how,” Rose mumbled.

“Because you’re brilliant,” James said firmly. “You really, really are. They wouldn’t have accepted you if you weren’t.”

“But what if I’m rubbish at it?” she asked, blinking back the stinging in her eyes.

“I don’t think you will be,” he said, “but if at any point you decide uni isn’t for you, there is no shame in that. Your worth is not dependent upon your level of education, Rose, and I will argue with anyone that says otherwise. You are brilliant in your own right and in your own way. And while I think you’ll do fine at school, I’ll support any decision you make. So please, love, stop worrying. You’ve got bigger things to worry about… like what you’re going to wear on our first date! I’ve got a new tie and everything!”

Rose let out a watery chuckle and swiped at her eyes.

“Got a new dress for it,” she said. “S’blue.”

“Ooh, send me a photo?” he asked.

“No way,” Rose said. “You’re getting the full effect of it whenever you take me on this date.”

“Oh, it’ll be the first night we meet,” he promised. “Got a lovely little restaurant in mind. Not as romantic as the one up in Scotland I’ll eventually want to take you to, but really, as long as it’s me and you, the location doesn’t matter, right?”

“Right,” she agreed.

They dissolved into silence, neither wanting to hang up but neither contributing further the conversation.

“You feeling better?” he asked quietly.

“A bit,” she said. “Thanks. I just… this is all a bit overwhelming.”

“I know,” he said. “But what really matters is we’ll be together in a mere twenty-six days. Eh? The
rest is just details.”

James finished lacing up his trainers and met his parents in the kitchen. He had been staying with them in California ever since his lease for his flat in Massachusetts ran out at the beginning of the month.

“Ready, mate?” his dad asked.

“Very,” he grinned. His parents were taking him out to dinner one last time before dropping him off at the airport so he could travel to London. He was practically vibrating with nervous, anticipatory energy and he could hardly stop thinking about his upcoming flights that would lead him to his soulmate.

“We’re so excited for you James,” Vera said, reaching up to slip her arms around his neck. He bent down to hug his mum tightly.

“We’ll fly back to Scotland for a few weeks this summer,” his dad promised, ushering his family to the car. “We want to meet Rose in person too.”

“So does she,” he said, remembering how excited Rose was not only for their official meeting, but also to meet his parents, who had been thoroughly doting on her for years. He loved how much Rose loved his family, and how loved by them she was in return.

“But first, a last family dinner,” Vera announced, slipping her seat belt on and adjusting the strap when it dug at her neck.

“Taken out of context, that sounds very morbid,” James teased.

“Oh, hush. You know what I mean,” Vera said, rolling her eyes at her son. “This caps off your year of lasts, eh?”

“Well, there’s still Richter Scale Day tomorrow,” James said.

He continued his teasing banter with his mum while his dad drove them towards the airport and to a little Japanese restaurant they all liked for dinner.

James dug his hand into his pocket for a pen to write out a good morning message for Rose when he was suddenly blinded by a pair of rapidly-approaching headlights. His heart hammered in his throat and time seemed to slow as his brain told him what was happening.

He gasped in a sharp breath and closed his eyes and tightened his muscles as many things happened at once: a deafening crash echoed in his ears, he was jolted to the side where his head hit something that shattered, and his world went dark.

Chapter End Notes

*free hugs*
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Wherein we learn the fate of our favorite characters.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has a warning for character death (not James or Rose).

Robert paced the length of the waiting room agitatedly as he waited for news, any new, on his family. The last hour was a blur of bright, flashing lights and many overlapping voices. He had been mostly conscious as emergency responders pried their car apart enough to get to them. They’d taken James and Vera away first, and neither of them had been conscious the last he’d seen them.

He had been briefly checked over by the medical staff when he arrived at the hospital, and aside from a few bruises, he was fine. So now he was left to wait with nothing but his thoughts for company.

He shoved a hand through his hair and tugged slightly, before he dropped his hand to his arm. He wriggled his fingers under his sleeve to rub them over the ink from Vera’s latest message to him.

Don’t forget, we need to pick up milk tonight after dinner xo.

Robert pulled his sleeve up completely and his eyes watered as he traced his thumb across his wife’s handwriting. He collapsed into a chair, feeling so overwhelmed and helpless.

After what felt like hours, a doctor finally approached him with a face more somber than any person’s ought to be.

“My wife? My son?” Robert croaked out, jumping up to stand in front of the doctor.

“How about we take a seat?” the doctor suggested softly.

“No! I need to know,” he demanded, flinching away from the doctor’s outstretched hand.

She sighed and nodded before she said, “Mr. McCrimmon, I am very sorry—”

“No,” he whimpered, wobbling slightly. He was going to be sick. “No, I don’t want to hear you’re sorry. I want to see my family!”

“Mr. McCrimmon, I am very sorry, but we lost your wife,” she continued. “There wasn’t anything we could do.”

The words echoed in his ears, but they didn’t mean anything. It was like someone scrambled together a few random letters and called it a sentence. The only word he could pick out was ‘wife’, but nothing else made sense. And what about ‘son’?
“And James?” he asked desperately. “Please…”

“We’ve stabilized your son,” the doctor said. “He hit his head quite hard, and there’s a bit of swelling. We’ve managed to get most of it down, but we’re keeping him sedated just to be safe. And his ribs are a bit banged up; nothing broken, but they’re badly bruised. He was incredibly lucky, and he should make a full recovery.”

He was able to understand those sentences better than the doctor’s first one. James was hurt, but he would be okay. But what about Vera?

“And my wife?” he asked faintly. His vision was going spotty and dark around the edges, and he wondered idly if he was about to pass out. His shaking knees were making that a very real possibility.

The doctor’s face pinched in sympathy, and she touched his shoulder as she tried to catch his eye. “We lost her,” she said gently. “Do you understand me? She died.”

The words still made no sense amidst the roaring in his ears.

“No. I want to see her,” he demanded, hot anger welling in his stomach. His wife was perfectly okay, and the doctor would realize she’d made a mistake when they saw her. Vera would smile at him with her beautiful smile and take his hand and tell him that everything was okay again, and the doctor would realize she had gotten it wrong. “Right now. I want to see my wife. You’ve got it wrong. It’s not her. She’s not— Where’s my wife? Where is she?!”

“Mr. McCrimmon, I’m very sorry for your loss.”

“No!” he shouted, about two seconds from demanding he speak to her supervisor. “Where is she?!”

The doctor sighed and said, “Come with me.”

She guided him to an elevator, and Robert followed numbly behind, unsure of where he was being led. The lift finally shuddered to a halt at the basement level. It was cool and dim, and Robert felt ill at the clean, antiseptic smell.

“Are you sure you want to see?”

Robert nodded mutely as the doctor led him into an even colder room where a lone, human-sized lump was lying on a metal table beneath a white sheet. The doctor slowly lowered the sheet, revealing the pale, pasty face of his wife.

“No,” Robert whispered, his ears ringing. He reached out with a shaking hand until his fingertips brushed the cool skin of her cheek. There wasn’t a mark on her. She looked like she could just be asleep.

He fumbled for the sheet and pulled it down to uncover her arm. He gagged when he saw Vera’s handwriting on the left forearm in exactly the same place it was on his. *Don’t forget, we need to pick up milk tonight after dinner xo.*

“No, no, no!” Robert choked on nothing and his knees gave out on him.

He fell to the floor and barely felt the smarting in his kneecaps.

“You’re wrong,” he whimpered, cradling his arm to his chest as he rubbed the words Vera had
written to him a few hours ago. “You’re wrong. She’s not dead. She’s not. She looks fine. You made a mistake. She’s fine. Wake her up.”

“I’m so sorry,” the doctor murmured, sinking to a crouch in front of him. She hated days like this, when she had to tell someone that their soulmate was dead. “The other vehicle hit her side directly, and at precisely the wrong angle. And her neck…”

Robert’s vision swam as his stomach heaved. Someone was rubbing his back as his stomach jumped and roiled. She couldn’t be dead. His wife, his soulmate, his very best friend, couldn’t be dead. She just couldn’t be! Oh, God, why couldn’t that truck have struck them from the other side? Why did it have to hit Vera and James?

Oh, God. James!

“I need my son,” he gasped out. “I need to see him. Let me see him! Take me to him, now!”

The doctor pursed her lips and ran a contemplative eye over him. She exhaled quietly as her face softened and she said, “It’s not technically visiting hours.”

A protest (a plea) was on Robert’s tongue, but the doctor held up her hand and said, “But I think we can make an exception this once. What’s the use of being head physician if not for this? Come on. I’ll take you to your son.”

Robert stood on numb legs, and nearly fell down again when he saw Vera’s face. He ran his trembling fingers across the writing on her wrist, then took note of her bare left hand.

“Where are her rings?” he asked quietly, tracing his thumb across the thin tan-line on the fourth finger of her left hand.

“Here.” The doctor pressed a small plastic bag into his hands, and Robert glanced down and saw two rings, a necklace, and her mobile phone in the bag.

He grit his teeth against the bile burning at the back of his throat as he leaned down to press the softest of kisses to Vera’s forehead. Her skin was cool, and he squeezed his eyes shut against the stinging sensation welling up behind them. He pressed a longer kiss to her forehead before he sucked in a sharp breath and turned away from his wife.

The doctor silently led Robert back to the elevator and then down a corridor that seemed far too long to fit in the hospital.

“Here he is,” the doctor said gently, resting a hand on Robert’s shoulder. “I’ll let the night staff know that you’re allowed to be in here. I am so sorry for your loss.”

Robert entered the room and saw his son lying on a bed with a tube of oxygen under his nose and a thick bandage on his forehead over his right eyebrow. He looked so small and pale and fragile, and Robert wanted to scoop him up like he’d done when James was little and hold him.

He settled for pulling the chair closer to the bed and sitting next to James.

“I’m so sorry, mate,” he whispered, feeling his eyes burn.

He drew in a shuddering breath as the first tear streaked down his face. He was lost to his grief then, and he sobbed for his wife, and for James, as he cursed himself for ever suggesting they go out for dinner that night.
His exhaustion finally pulled him under, and he fell asleep with his cheek pillowed on the arm that still bore his wife’s handwriting.

oOoOo

Robert was awoken a few hours later by a nurse checking on James.

“How is he?” he asked, rubbing his hands over his aching eyes. “Is he okay?”

“He’s fine,” she soothed. “He’s still sedated, and will still be until later this afternoon. You could go home and get some proper sleep, if you’d like? Grab a change of clothes?”

“No, I’d rather stay with him,” Robert said, brushing James’s fringe off his forehead. “His mum… My wife…”

The nurse nodded sympathetically. “I heard. I’m so sorry.”

Robert wished James would wake up. It was frightening to see his son lying unconscious in a hospital bed, and the longer he stayed asleep, the greater his anxieties grew.

The morning dawned and morphed into the afternoon, and Robert was being driven half-mad waiting. But finally, just as Robert finished his lunch of a soggy hospital cafeteria sandwich, James started stirring.

After a few minutes of James moving around restlessly, he finally opened his eyes.

“Dad?” he croaked. His blinking was slow and his eyes were unfocused, but he was awake. Robert breathed a sigh of relief and stood next to his son.

“Where are we?” James asked, his voice thick and groggy. “What happened?”

Robert moved his lips wordlessly for a minute before he said, “What do you remember?”

“Gonna go out for dinner…” James slurred, his eyes fluttering closed again. “M’really tired though.”

“Okay, mate,” Robert whispered. “You go back to sleep.”

“M’kay.”

James went back to sleep, and Robert sat down heavily in his chair to wait once more.

An hour passed before James was conscious again.

“Dad?”

Robert looked up at James instantly.

“Don’t feel good,” James whispered, rubbing a finger into his eyes. “Head hurts. Kinda sleepy.”

“You can keep sleeping if you’d like,” Robert said.

“Aren’t we going to dinner?” he asked, his eyes rolling back a little every time he blinked.

“Not anymore,” Robert said gently. He ran his fingers through James’s hair like he’d done when James was little. “You can go back to bed.”

James was already snoring softly by the time Robert finished speaking.
The nurses assured Robert that this was normal behavior for someone coming out of sedation, particularly with a concussion, but it didn’t make it any easier to see his normally-loquacious son struggling to thread sentences together.

James was in and out a few more times that day, but hardly longer than five minutes at a time.

Robert called a friend that evening and had a change of clothes and some toiletries dropped off at the hospital. He felt a little better after a shower and some fresh clothes, but he still felt utterly exhausted, emotionally and physically.

James awoke once more late that night, just as Robert was about to crawl into the cot the nurses had provided for him.

“Dad? S’Rose’s birthday soon, innit?” James slurred, trying to roll over onto his side. He winced and flopped to his back again, panting and hugging his ribs.

“Yeah, mate,” Robert whispered, his heart aching when he realized tomorrow was Rose’s birthday, and that James would miss it.

“Can’t wait,” James murmured, eyes his fluttering shut. “Gonna meet her soon.”

“I can’t wait, either,” Robert murmured.

“Hope I feel better for her,” James mumbled, already half asleep. “Gonna take her to dinner. And dancing. Like you and Mum did. Can’t wait. She’s gonna be so beautiful.”

James sighed softly and slowly wriggled around until he was curled up on his side facing away from Robert.

Late the next morning when James awoke, his eyes looked much clearer and blinking no longer looked like such an effort.

“How are you feeling, mate?” Robert asked when he saw James struggling to sit up.

He wrapped his arms around James’s shoulders to help him sit up as he raised the bed to a more upright position.

“Okay?” Robert asked, and James nodded.

“Where am I?” he asked. “What happened? Feels like I’ve been run over by a lorry.”

Robert sucked in a sharp breath. Well, you’re not wrong…

“You’re in the hospital,” Robert said. “We were in a bit of an accident.”

James scrunched his eyes, trying to remember, but everything felt muddled and hazy, and his head was killing him.

“Oh.” James looked around the room, but it was just him and his dad. “Where’s Mum? Is she okay?”

James saw his dad’s face crumple before Robert ducked his head to look at his hands. He was wringing the sheets tight enough to make his knuckles turn white.

James’s heart fell into his stomach and he felt ill.

“Dad?” he whispered more urgently. “Where’s Mum?”
“She…” His dad’s voice trembled around the word.

“No,” James begged.

“She’s gone,” he finally choked out, trembling as James saw a tear drip off the tip of his dad’s nose and onto the sheets of his bed.

James’s pulse roared in his ears as he watched his dad’s shoulder’s shake. He reached out and rested a shaking hand at the back of his dad’s neck. He tugged slightly and his dad immediately leaned forward to receive the hug James was offering.

James’s eyes burned as his dad wept into his shoulder, dampening his horrid hospital gown and making noises he never knew a human could make. James’s heart ached for his dad and for himself as he tried to process what his dad had just told him. His mum was dead.

*Dead.* The word didn’t sound right in his head and he kept repeating it until it sounded like a completely foreign, made-up word.

His dad’s breath hitched, like he was trying to contain his sobs, but his soft, gasping whimpers showed how unsuccessful he was being.

“Shhh,” James whispered, hugging his dad more tightly. He rubbed his hand up and down his dad’s back like his dad did for him whenever he was upset. “Shhh.”

Robert quieted after many long moments. He sniffled sharply and pressed his lips to James’s temple before standing out of the embrace.

James pretended to examine the machinery he was hooked up to as his dad composed himself, but he continued to watch him out of the corner of his eye.

He couldn’t imagine the grief of losing a soulmate.

Wait…

*Soulmate…

Rose!*

James frantically reached for his dad’s phone, which was lying on the bed near his feet. He gasped when his ribs sent a searing pain through his chest as he leaned down for the phone.

“James?”

James ignored him and pressed the home button. The air left his lungs when a picture of him, his dad, and his mum smiled back at him, but he ignored it in favor of looking at the date and time.

10:27am on April 27th.

He wanted to throw up. He was missing Rose’s birthday. He hadn’t even wished her a happy birthday yet, or told her that he wouldn’t be there for her today.

His lungs ached and his chest burned as he finally looked at his arms for the first time since waking up.

*Travel safe, love. Can’t wait to see you xoxo*
What time can I expect you?

James? Is everything all right?

James, please.

James hysterically fought against the sheets and the wires to the machines that bound him, needing to find a pen.

“What are you doing? James, mate, calm down! You’ll hurt yourself,” Robert said, grabbing James’s shoulders to get him to sit still.

“Get off!” he snapped, trying to wriggle free even as his ribs throbbed with his violent motions. “Get off! Need a pen! Give me a pen! I’ve missed Rose’s birthday! I’m supposed to be there! I’m late! I can’t miss her birthday! I promised I’d be there! I promised! I… She… We…”

A sob bubbled out of James’s throat and he clung tightly to his dad’s open arms.

“Breathe,” Robert murmured, his voice wavering with his own tears. He cradled James’s shoulders as he ran a hand through James’s hair. “Breathe, mate. She’ll understand. Here.” Robert reached into his pocket for the pen he always kept there—and, oh, the realization that he wouldn’t need to keep a pen on him anymore nearly sent him into further paroxysms of grief—and he handed it to James. “Here. Here’s a pen. Let me find your phone and you can give her a call, too, if you want.”

Robert turned away to rummage through the plastic bag containing everything James had in his pockets before the accident.

“Oh, no.”

James looked over at his dad, who was holding the pocket watch James kept on his person at all times. The hinge was gnarled, the glass faces of both clocks were cracked, and it was no longer keeping time for the clock set to his own time zone.

“I can try to get this fixed for you,” Robert whispered, delicately setting the broken watch on the bedside table.

“Don’t worry about it,” James mumbled, staring at the watch with a hollow feeling in his chest.

Robert finally found James’s phone, and saw that it looked equally damaged. The face was splintered, but it at least still turned on.

“I’ll get you a new phone, too,” Robert promised.

He glanced down at James's exposed forearms and at the pen he had poised there, and he scrubbed the back of his neck. “Erm. Well. I'm feeling a bit peckish. Gonna go get food. And tell the doctors you’re awake. Then we can see when we can get you out of here. I’m going to head home for a bit and get some stuff for you. And see about replacing your phone. And catch a quick kip. Erm. Lots to do. I’ll be back. Love you. I’m so glad to see you awake, James.”

“Yeah. Love you, too,” James murmured, leaning into his dad’s embrace.

James’s heart ached for his dad as he watched him leave the room, but he understood. How painful must it be for his dad to see James writing to his soulmate when he just lost his?

James sniffled as he rubbed at his eyes and stared at his forearms.
What was he supposed to say? He’d just ruined her birthday and their long-awaited meeting. Rose must be so angry and disappointed with him.

No, he said firmly. No. She’ll understand. She loves me, no matter what. It’ll be okay. She’ll understand.

His fingers worked on autopilot to write the one word that always made him feel better.

“Rose.”

James! His breath caught in his throat when she replied right away. I was so worried. Did your flight just get in?

“I’m not in London,” he said. “Still in California.”

Oh?

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” he wrote frantically. “I wanted to be there. You know I did. God, I want to be there. But my family and I were in a car accident the night before last.”

Oh, God, are you all right? Your mum and dad?

“No. My mum…” James’s throat swelled shut and his eyes blurred with wet heat. “She died.”

There was nothing from Rose for several long minutes, and James’s breaths came in short, rasping pants the longer she stayed silent.

“Rose, please,” he begged.

James, I am so sorry. I’m so sorry. I can’t even… God, I’m so sorry. Please tell me how to help. Do you need me to come to California? I’ll be on the next flight out. God, I’m so, so sorry. My heart is breaking for you and your dad right now.

“There’s no point for you to fly to California. We’ll be back in Scotland in a few days,” James answered, despite wishing for her to be able to magically teleport to his side. He really wanted her with him right now. “Maybe you can come up when we get back? Or I’ll come down and visit you. I just… This isn’t how our first meeting was supposed to go. I was supposed to be there with you already. I’m sorry.”

don’t you dare apologize James. This is a terrible and sudden tragedy and you could never have predicted this would happen. Don’t worry about me. Worry about yourself and your dad. He needs you right now.

“Yeah.”

Do you want to talk, love? I can call you.

“No,” he said immediately, knowing that if he heard Rose’s voice he wouldn’t be able to choke back the sobs any longer. “No. Can we just… Play with me?”

They passed the next few hours playing the sort of games they hadn’t played since Rose was a little kid. They played countless rounds of hangman, dots and boxes, and Pictionary, until James realized it was well past midnight in London.

“Crap, I’m sorry,” he wrote after she won their latest round of dots and boxes. “I should let you sleep.”
I’m fine. I can keep you company for a while longer.

“I appreciate it,” he said, hoping she knew how much he meant that. “But it’s nearly one in the morning for you. Go to sleep, love. I’ll let you know tomorrow what the plans are for flying back to Scotland.”

Okay. Are you sure you don’t want to keep playing?

“Nah, go to sleep,” he said, despite wanting to keep her with him to distract him. They were keeping him in the hospital overnight again—hopefully releasing him in the morning—and his dad said he was going to spend the night at home to get everything arranged for them to fly back to Scotland once James was ready. His dad had brought him his iPad, but James didn’t think there were enough books or games in the world to distract him from the grief he was trying so desperately to lock away.

Okay. Night James. You get some rest too. I love you so much. And I am so sorry.

“Me too,” he wrote. “Love you, Rose.”

And if you need anything, or just want to talk, call me. I don’t care what time it is. Call me.

James clenched his jaw at that invitation. God, he desperately wanted to hear her voice. But she really needed sleep, and he was feeling a little groggy too.

“Oh, he said. “Night, love. And Happy Birthday.”

oOoOo

Rose chewed on her lip as she tried to calm the sick feeling in her stomach. It was the night before her birthday, and she hadn’t heard anything from her soulmate all day. Not even his usual good morning greeting. And he didn’t reply when she’d written to him either.

“James? Is everything all right?” she asked nervously. She’d gone to bed hours ago but couldn’t quiet her racing thoughts enough to fall asleep. What if he was having second thoughts? No, she told herself firmly. No, he wouldn’t do that.

But then why wasn’t he talking to her?

She fell into a restless sleep eventually, but woke up after having dreamed that her entire life had been a dream, and James and soulmates didn’t exist. She awoke gasping, and after looking at her bare arms, she began sobbing her fears and frustrations into her pillow.

Rose avoided her mum as much as she could during her birthday. Whenever Jackie asked what time James was coming, Rose gave a noncommittal shrug and said he’d gotten held up and might not make it today.

Jackie looked at Rose, and saw the heavy bags under her eyes and the way Rose’s eyes kept flickering to her sleeve-covered arms. Something was very wrong, Jackie knew, but Rose didn’t seem to want to talk about it and Jackie didn’t know how to ask.

Rose locked herself in her bedroom with her laptop for the day, and thankfully Jackie left her alone.

Not only was James silent on her arms, but he wasn’t anywhere online either. His last Facebook post was thirty-six hours ago when he exclaimed to the people of the internet how excited he was to finally meet his soulmate. He wasn’t active on their IM or Skype chats. He was just… gone.
Rose changed into her pajamas and laid down, nursing a stress and exhaustion headache. She was going to take a nap, and when she woke up, she was going to start tracking down her soulmate.

She managed to get a few solid hours of sleep, and it was nearly dark when she woke up. She smelled dinner cooking, and she glanced at her arms hopefully. But they were still devoid of anything but her own writing.

She grabbed her laptop, checking once more for any messages from James—or even Vera or Robert—but there was nothing.

She was just about to book a train ticket to Scotland to try and connect with the McCrimmons’ friends and family to figure out what was happening when a flash of blue caught her eye. Her heart stuttered when she saw the single word.

Rose.

Tears of anger and fear and frustration prickled at her eyes, but she forced her anger down. She knew there was an explanation for his silence. But blimey, he’d scared her!

“James! I was so worried! Did your flight just get in?”

I’m not in London. Still in California.

Her heart sank into her stomach. She knew something had to have happened to keep him quiet for so long, but whatever happened must have been very bad if he was still in California. She prayed it was nothing more than foul weather or maybe an earthquake that had delayed his travels, but the knot in her belly told her it was something far worse.

“Oh?” she asked, trying to reign in her anxiety. She wanted to call him and hear his voice and have him assure her that he was still as excited to meet her as she was to meet him.

I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. His words were fast and sloppy, and the sense of foreboding in Rose’s gut deepened. I wanted to be there. You know I did. God, I want to be there. But my family and I were in a car accident the night before last.

Her ears were ringing. He must have been seriously injured if he couldn’t write to her nearly forty-eight hours…

“Oh, God, are you all right? Your mum and dad?” she asked, her brain wheeling through all the possibilities of what might’ve happened to him. He had to be okay though, right? If he was talking to her? He must be well enough to write, so that meant he was okay…

No. My mum— Rose felt ill, already knowing what the end of that sentence was. She died.

Rose felt light-headed and numb as tears fell down her cheeks in fat rivulets.


Jackie burst into the room and sat beside Rose on her bed. The moment Jackie’s arm was around her shoulders, something broke in Rose and she started sobbing into her mum’s chest.

“Shhh,” Jackie said. “Shhh, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, sweetheart.”

“Not James,” she managed to choke out.

“What?” Jackie asked.
“Not James,” she hiccupped. “James is okay.”

“There what—?” Jackie was at a loss as to how to help Rose. What else could get her daughter so worked up if not for that boy?

“His mum!” Rose wailed. “God, his mum! She…she…”

Jackie filled in the blank quite easily, and she wrapped Rose in an even tighter hug. She hummed a soothing tune into Rose’s ear as she rocked her daughter from side to side, but her own mind was spinning. Vera, that lovely woman that practically adopted Rose, was dead?

“I need to go to him,” Rose whimpered, pulling back from her mum. She was shaking as she tried to catch her breath. A tissue was thrust into her hand, and she blew her nose and swiped at her eyes. “I need to go to him. I need to be with him. He’s… oh, bollocks!”

Rose glanced down at her arm and realized she’d never replied to James.

Rose, please.

“James, I am so sorry,” she wrote, willing her hand to stay steady. “I’m so sorry. I can’t even… God, I’m so sorry. Please tell me how to help. Do you need me to come to California? I’ll be on the next flight out. I’ll be there as quick as I can. God, I’m so, so sorry. My heart is breaking for you and your dad right now.”

“Tell me what you need, sweetheart,” Jackie said, rubbing Rose’s back as she watched her daughter talk to James. “Let me find a suitcase for you. Then I can help you get on a flight. California, right?”

Rose hardly heard her mum, so focused as she was on her arm and on helping James.

There’s no point for you to fly to California. We’ll be back in Scotland in a few days. Maybe you can come up when we get back? Or I’ll come down and visit you. I just… This isn’t how our first meeting was supposed to go. I was supposed to be there with you already. I’m sorry.

Her heart broke for him as he tried to apologize unnecessarily.

“Don’t you dare apologize, James,” she told him. “This is a terrible and sudden tragedy and you could never have predicted this would happen. Don’t worry about me. Worry about yourself and your dad. He needs you right now.”

“Rose, sweetheart, I’ve got that suitcase,” Jackie said. “Give me your computer. I’ll find a flight for you.”

“Don’t bother,” Rose said. “He and his dad are coming to Scotland. James told me to meet him there. I’ll look for a train ticket whenever he lets me know when he’ll be back. What do I do, Mum? What am I supposed to do? I want to help him but I don’t know what to do!”

Rose’s breath hitched on another sob, and she squeezed her eyes shut to try and swallow it down.

“Just be there for him, sweetheart,” Jackie said, smoothing a hand through Rose’s hair. “Just be there. Let him know you’re here for him, and if he doesn’t want to talk, that’s okay too. I’ll make you a cuppa tea and bring you a spot of food. I’m so sorry, sweetheart.”

Rose nodded and turned her attention back to James.

“Do you want to talk, love?” she asked, ready to go get the phone. “I can call you.”
No. His immediate refusal stung, but she kept her mum’s words in mind. She didn’t want to leave him alone, but she didn’t want to make it worse. Never before had she felt so useless. No. Can we just... Play with me?

He was already setting up a game of hangman, and a wave of melancholic nostalgia washed over her as she started playing a game they hadn’t played in almost a decade.

She played with him long into the night. It was nearing one o’clock in the morning before James seemed to remember the time zone difference. Not that Rose cared. She would’ve stayed up all night with him if he asked.

Crap, I’m sorry, he wrote after she won their latest round of dots and boxes. I should let you sleep.

“I’m fine,” she said through a yawn. “I can keep you company for a while longer.”

I appreciate it. But it’s nearly one in the morning for you. Go to sleep, love. I’ll let you know tomorrow what the plans are for flying back to Scotland.

“Okay,” she replied. “Are you sure you don’t want to keep playing?”

Nah, go to sleep.

“Okay,” she said, knowing she needed sleep but knowing it wouldn’t be restful. “Night James. You get some rest too. I love you so much. And I am so sorry.”

Me too. Love you, Rose.

“And if you need anything, or just want to talk, call me. I don’t care what time it is. Call me,” she said, hoping he realized she was serious.

Okay. Night, love. And Happy Birthday.

Rose reluctantly turned her lamp off and stuck her pen under her pillow as she tried to fall asleep.
“James, mate.”

James grunted as someone gently rubbed his arm. Couldn’t they see he was sleeping?

“James, we’ve landed. Time to go.”

James blinked open his eyes and saw people grabbing their luggage from the upper storage compartments of the plane and finally remembered where he was.

He had been released from the hospital the morning after he had awoken, with the instruction for him to take it easy for the next few weeks to let his body heal. He asked if it was okay for him to fly, knowing his dad wanted to get to Scotland sooner rather than later. The doctor said he should be okay, but he should try to rest as much as possible.

He and his dad had been traveling for over twenty-four hours, and James still wasn’t completely recovered from his concussion. He was so sick of sleeping all the time, but he felt as though he could collapse into his bed once more.

“Have you told Rose we’ve landed?” Robert asked, standing and stretching before grabbing his carry-on item.

“I will,” James said breezily, picking up his backpack and following his dad into the airport.

They made quick work of getting their luggage and hailing a taxi to their home.

It seemed huge and empty when they stepped into the foyer.

“What time is Rose coming?” Robert asked, glancing around at the sheet-covered furniture. “We’ll have to do a bit of cleaning before she gets here.”

James shrugged and turned towards the stairs to walk to his bedroom.

“James?”

He stopped and sighed.

“I haven’t told her we’re in Scotland yet,” James mumbled.

Robert furrowed his brows. “Why not?”

James shrugged again and stared at the floor as he said, “I can go visit her after... after everything here is taken care of. I don’t want to… I’ll feel bad if she and I… when you’ve just…” James floundered to explain himself without explicitly saying the words dead or soulmate in the same sentence.
Robert’s face dawned with understanding, before he pursed his lips into a thin line.

“James, listen to me very carefully,” his dad said firmly. “I don’t want you to feel as though you have to avoid talking to or about Rose in front of me because you’re afraid you’ll upset me. Believe me, there is nothing you can do or say that could possibly make me more upset than I already am. Except for ignoring Rose. Soulmates are a beautiful thing, so don’t you dare hide it.”

James nodded and stepped up to embrace his dad.

“Now go tell Rose that we’re home,” his dad said. “You’re not the only one who’s anxious to see her. I’ve been wanting to meet her for twelve years now, same as you.”

“Yeah,” James whispered, a ghost of a smile crossing his face as he started to let himself get excited to meet Rose. “Thanks, Dad.”

James rushed up to his room for a quick shower and shave before he grabbed a pen.

“We’re back in Scotland,” James said as he picked out a pair of jeans and a button-up shirt. “If you still wanted to come up?”

Of course! I’m going to look for a plane ticket. You know, I’ve never traveled in an airplane before.

“It can be fun, if not a little boring,” James said. “But from London to Scotland should only take an hour. Flying across the Atlantic is a different story.”

The next available flight is this afternoon. I’d be getting in around 2pm. Is that too soon? I can come tomorrow instead if you’d prefer to rest up after traveling for so long.

“No!” he said immediately. “No, please come as soon as you can. Circumstance has already delayed our meeting by three days. I don’t want to wait any longer.”

Then 2pm it is. I can’t wait to see you, my James.

“I can’t wait to see you, my Rose,” he replied. “Travel safe, love.”

James joined his dad in the kitchen, moving with more energy than he’d felt in days. Rose was coming, and he felt like there was still so much to do before she got there.

“Rose will be here this afternoon,” James announced, opening up various cabinets and the fridge to take stock of the food they had. “I was thinking of heading to the grocer’s. We’ve not much… Dad?”

His dad was sitting in his usual place at the table with his black and white striped mug in front of him, staring at the black and white polka dot mug across the table where his mum usually sat. Tears welled up in James’s throat at the sight.

“I didn’t even think,” his dad murmured, still staring at his wife’s mug. “I just made her a cuppa, too. Didn’t even realize it.”

“Oh,” he whispered, rushing up to his dad and wrapping his arms around his shoulders.

“I miss her so much,” Robert whispered brokenly, clinging to James’s arms.

“Me, too,” he said. “I’m so sorry, Dad.”

James held his dad until Robert patted his arm and pulled away.
He rubbed his eyes then glanced up at James. “You said Rose would be here in a few hours? Shall we go out and get some food?”

James nodded and he went with his dad into town to stock up on their depleted pantry.

On their way home, James spotted a tiny florist’s shop, which reminded him of the twelve-year tradition he still needed to keep.

“Can we stop in for a minute?” James asked, pointing to the shop.

Robert pulled in and waited in the car while James went in to get Rose’s gift. He picked out a bouquet of eighteen dark red roses, a vase, and a blank card for him to write the familiar sentiment on.

“For someone special?” the shop owner asked as he swiped James’s credit card.

“My soulmate,” he said, smiling softly. “She just turned eighteen and is coming to see me this afternoon.”

“Oh, well congratulations!” the florist said happily.

James thanked the man and carefully picked up the roses and the bag with the vase, plant food, and card before returning to his dad.

When they got home, they spent the rest of the morning cleaning and tidying the house. James put together one of the guest rooms for Rose, and he set her flowers onto the desk in the bedroom so she would see them when she first walked in.

He felt like he swallowed a bucket of butterflies. He was so nervous to meet Rose in person. Logically, he knew he shouldn’t be. They were soulmates, each other’s other half; he’d known Rose for over a decade now, and had loved her for most of those years.

A few minutes after two o’clock, Rose wrote to him and told him she had landed in the airport and that she would catch a cab as soon as she found her luggage.

“You should’ve said! I would’ve come to pick you up!” James complained.

“It’s all right. I know how to take a cab.”

“Fine,” James grumbled. “See you in a bit, love. You’ve got the address?”

Been mailing you stuff for twelve years, Rose teased. I think I still remember it.

Knowing that Rose was only a thirty-minute drive away filled him with a frenetic energy. He paced the house and cleaned rooms he had already cleaned, before finally setting about making a cake for her to make up for missing her birthday.

After checking the cabinets to confirm he had all the ingredients, he pulled his pen from his pocket.

“What?

He drew a little birthday cake on the back of his hand, complete with three little candles (which he bracketed with parentheses and wrote x6), and a pair of stick figures in party hats holding hands.

You’re a nutter. Chocolate.
He grinned at his hand and started making the cake batter. He was filled with bittersweet nostalgia as he remembered his mum teaching him to make cakes from scratch rather than from a box. But he shoved aside his sadness and instead focused on his happiness that Rose was so close to him now.

After he popped the cake in the oven and licked the stirring spoon clean, he wrote, “I’m not sure we can be soulmates if you passed up on the banana.”

Who likes bananas?

“I do! Bananas are good! Excellent source of potassium!”

See above: nutter.

“But your nutter.”

Yes, you are, she replied. James? I’m here.

His heart stuttered anxiously as the doorbell rang and echoed in his ears. He glanced into the living room at his dad, who had a sad smile on his face, but nodded his head for James to get the door.

He took in a big breath, fluttered his hands around his hair and shirt, before he rushed to the door and yanked it open.

The most beautiful person in the universe was on the other side.

“Rose,” he whispered.

She offered him a shy smile and wriggled her fingers in the cutest wave he’d ever seen as she said, “Hello.”

He took a step towards her with outstretched arms and exhaled in relief when she lifted her arms to receive his hug. Oh, she fit perfectly. He wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her gently, ignoring the ache in his ribs in favor of holding her as close to him as she could be. He buried his face into her neck and the smell of eucalyptus and mint wafted to his nose. He breathed her in more deeply, trying to put a name to the scent he detected beneath the artificial aroma of her shampoo, but all his brain supplied to him was Rose.

“Thank you for coming,” he whispered, still swaying her from side to side and relishing the feeling of her arms around his neck.

“Of course I came,” she whispered, and he shivered when he felt her lips press to his ear. “I’m so sorry, James.”

He tightened his arms around her waist and buried his nose deeper into her hair as he squeezed his eyes shut.

They stood in the doorway for many long minutes, just holding each other, until James finally became aware that the oven was beeping.

“Your cake!”

He pulled back from their embrace and glanced down at the suitcase at her feet. He took it and carried it inside and set it in the foyer as Rose toed off her shoes.

He laced his fingers through hers and dragged her towards the kitchen, where his dad was setting the finished cake on the counter to cool. He looked up when they approached and offered a small but
genuine smile at Rose.

Rose wriggled her fingers free of James’s before she took a step towards his dad. She lifted her arms in an invitation for a hug, one that his dad automatically accepted.

James watched his soulmate embrace his dad, feeling so bittersweet about this meeting. He desperately wished his mum was there; she loved Rose so much too, and they’d been so bloody close to meeting each other. A flash of anger sizzled down his spine as James wished, not for the first time, for the driver of the truck that had hit them to rot in hell for the rest of eternity for what he had done to his family.

He sniffed against the ache in his throat as he scrubbed his hands across his face, but it was hardly any use when he saw the way Rose was rubbing his dad’s back as he shuddered in her arms.

Rose gave his dad one last squeeze before they both dropped their arms.

“It’s so nice to finally meet you, darling,” his dad said, pressing a soft kiss to Rose’s hair. “We’ve all been so excited; my wife… she would’ve loved this. Loved you.”

Rose drew in a ragged breath as she wiped her eyes.

“And I loved her,” Rose whispered. “I love all of you. And I’m so sorry.”

Robert gave her a tight smile before he pressed another kiss to her forehead and said, “We’re glad you’re here, Rose.”

Rose turned her attentions back to James once Robert left the kitchen. She must’ve seen his tears, because her own eyes filled again as she immediately walked up to him and enveloped him in her arms once again.

James could hardly breathe through the pressure in his chest, and he sobbed out a breath as tears welled in his eyes. Despite his best efforts, more took their place until he was weeping quietly in Rose’s arms.

She was crying softly too, and this whole meeting was an utter mess, but he was so glad she was there with him.

They pulled back after a long minute, and Rose glanced up to his forehead. She sniffled and blinked through tears as she raised a shaking hand to the stitched-up gash above his eyebrow.

“I was so worried about you,” Rose whimpered, tracing her thumb over his eyebrow. “God, I was so scared! I thought you’d—”

Her breath hitched and her face crumpled, and James pulled her back into his arms.

“Shh,” he whispered, rocking her from side to side. “I’m so sorry I worried you, love.”

Once both of their tears had dried, James gave Rose one more squeeze and let her go.

“Erm, what would you like for dinner?” James asked. “I’m pretty good with pasta dishes. Lasagna is a favorite of my dad’s and I think he’d appreciate it. But if you don’t like lasagna, we can make something else. Or there’s a pizza shop that delivers out here. If you’d rather not cook.”

“Lasagna’s fine,” Rose said, placing her hand on his arm to stop his rambling. “Erm, I’m not the best cook, but…”
“I can teach you?” James offered. “Best start with bread; that takes the longest.”

“I thought bread was an all-day thing?” Rose asked with a scrunched nose as she watched James take the ingredients out of the cabinets.

“Depends what type you’re making,” he said. “The one I’m planning to make has no raise-time. Just mix it all together, put it in the fridge for at least two hours, then pop it in the oven. Simple but tasty.”

Rose smiled at him and watched him whip up the dough, helping occasionally when he instructed her.

“You can knead this out, if you want?” he asked, plopping the gooey dough onto a film of flour he spread on the counter.

“You just don’t want to get your hands dirty,” Rose teased, tugging up her sleeves before tentatively rolling the bread around on the counter.

“You got me,” he said with a wink. “You keep doing that, I’ll start washing up. Make sure it doesn’t get too dry. It should feel a little tacky and quite elastic.”

Rose kneaded it for another few minutes before James stepped up behind her to take a look. The heat from his chest radiated into her back, making her shiver. He rested his chin on her shoulder and reached around her to poke the mound of dough.

“Perfect!” he proclaimed. “Master Bread Kneader, you are!”

Rose giggled and held her doughy hands out in front of her. “Now what?”

“Roll it into a circle. Well. An oblong circle. More of an oval, really. Or ellipse,” he instructed, handing her a rolling pin.

“I never knew you liked to cook,” Rose commented as she tried to work the dough into the proper shape.

“Oh, yes!” he said. “It’s all very organized and you’re given step-by-step instructions. Bit like a chemistry laboratory. It’s mindless. And you get to eat it after you’ve done instead of toss it into a waste bin and go to your next class. Oop, you’re getting a bit too circular. Roll it the other way for a bit. Spread it out.”

James continued instructing her on what to do and how to eventually roll it into a loaf-shaped mound.

“Right, just put it on this pan, and we’ll refrigerate it for a few hours,” he said. “It’s a bit early to start the main course yet. Ehm. Want to watch a film or something? Or take a walk?”

“A walk sounds nice,” Rose said as she washed her hands. “Are you up for it, though? And your dad… does he want to join us?”

“I’ll ask,” he said.

James walked into the living room and saw his dad asleep on the couch. His heart twinged in sympathy, and he pulled the afghan off the floor to cover his dad.

Robert stirred and blinked up at James.

“Shh, go back to sleep,” James murmured. “Rose and I are going to take a walk. We’ll be back
“M’kay,” he mumbled. “Take her to the lake?”

“Was planning on it,” James said with a smile. The lake was always his favorite place to hide out at when he was a kid. He’d spent countless hours of his youth there skimming stones or doing homework.

James joined Rose in the kitchen again and said, “He’s having a bit of a kip, so it’s just the two of us. I’ve got the perfect spot in mind. Let’s go, Rose Tyler!”

They both grabbed their shoes before Rose followed him out the back door and admired the spacious backyard and the forest that encroached on the lawn.

She followed him to the edge of the woods, and finally picked out a little dirt path that wound between the trees. She tentatively brushed her hand against James’s and sighed happily when his fingers immediately twined with hers.

They hardly spoke as they walked, and Rose was relieved that the silence was comfortable rather than suffocating.

After they’d walked for nearly a mile or so, the trees started thinning out, and Rose could hear the quiet murmuring of moving water. James squeezed her fingers before he let them fall from his hand.

“The ground’s a bit rugged,” he explained. “Especially if you’ve never walked it before.”

Rose saw what he meant. The ground sloped suddenly downwards and the relatively smooth path they’d been walking on was gone, replaced by gnarled tree roots and ruts from washed-out earth. Rose followed James’s footsteps exactly and stared at her feet as she descended the hill.

A fallen tree greeted her at the very bottom of the hill. James vaulted over it, then turned back around to help her climb it. When they were both on the other side, a wide but shallow stream was bubbling in front of them.

The water was clearer than anything Rose had ever seen, and the trees and moss and shrubberies were a deep, healthy green. Rose felt as though she’d stumbled into a nature documentary, and she half expected David Attenborough to start speaking.

The lake James had wanted to take her to was still another half a mile away, but his ribs were too sore to go any farther. No matter. He could take her there later when he was feeling better and when they didn’t have to worry about losing daylight.

They sat together on the fallen log and enjoyed each other’s presence and the sound of nature around them. They hardly spoke, except to comment on the peacefulness around them and for James to share little stories about the time spent out here when he was a child.

After about an hour, James suggested they head back before they lost the light. He could probably navigate the path in the dark, but Rose might struggle with it.

James took Rose’s hand once they’d climbed the hill and were on relatively stable ground once more.

Once they made it back to the house, they washed up of any dirt left on them from their walk and started preparing dinner together.
James never thought he could get such joy from doing the simplest task. In the six years that he had been cooking for himself, he’d never had as much fun as he was having now, and he knew he had Rose to thank for that. Simply being in the same room as her increased his mood ten-fold.

“Oi, you planning on helping or just supervising?” Rose asked, mock-glaring up at him as she assembled the lasagna into layers.

“I love you,” he blurted out.

A piece of noodle slipped from her fingers and thwacked wetly onto the floor. She wiped her hands before turning around to face him. She stepped closer to him, and his hands automatically settled on her waist as her arms looped around his neck.

“I love you, too, James,” she replied, softly stroking the hairs on the back of his neck.

She was so close to him now. He could feel the warmth of her, smell the fresh air still clinging to her hair, see the flecks of gold in her whiskey eyes, see the little callus in her bottom lip from her having chewed on it.

He leaned closer and saw her gaze drop to his lips as his flickered to hers. Her breath puffed against his chin as he paused with his nose hovering just above hers.

“May I kiss you?” he asked, bringing his hands up to cup her jaw.

“Yeah,” she whispered, tilting her head up in invitation.

He stroked his thumbs across the apples of her cheeks and carefully covered her lips with his. They were soft and warm and pliant beneath his. It was a chaste kiss, just a press of lips, but it felt so amazing.

James pulled away from the kiss and rested his forehead against hers.

“Was that okay?” he asked nervously, hoping she enjoyed it as much as he had.

“Yeah,” she murmured, rubbing her fingers across his neck in a way that made him shiver. “Bit short, though.”

James rubbed the tip of his nose against hers and whispered, “Well, we can’t have that.”

He tilted his head to the side and pressed his lips to hers once more. Their lips moved tentatively across each other’s, growing bolder and more confident the longer the kiss went on. James hummed appreciatively when she adjusted the kiss so that his bottom lip was between hers. She sucked it into her mouth, and James thought his knees might give way at the sheer pleasure of the kiss.

He groaned into her mouth as his hands dropped to the small of her back to tug her closer, and he delighted when he felt her arms tighten around his neck to hold him just as close.

Their lips parted and met with growing finesse, and James thought he could spend hours kissing her. He knew a physical relationship would be enjoyable, but if he was deriving this much pleasure just from a kiss, he was sure he would implode when they made love for the first time.

An ill-timed beeping of the oven interrupted their kiss, and James panted softly for breath as he rested his forehead against hers. He licked his lips, still tasting the faint trace of Rose on them.

“Blimey,” he mumbled, his voice hoarse and husky.
Rose nodded in agreement.

“That was nice,” she whispered.

“Very nice.”

James pressed a lingering kiss to Rose’s forehead before he turned back to their half-made lasagna. He finished assembling the dish and popped it into the oven before returning to the fridge to grab the bread dough.

They finished preparing dinner together, stealing a kiss or two whenever they could.

Rose worked on setting the table while James went to fetch his dad. Robert was in the living room, watching an art history documentary that James was sure Rose would also enjoy.

“Dad, we’ve made dinner,” James said.

“Oh, I can take a plate in here if you’d prefer to be alone with Rose?” his dad offered.

James scoffed. “Nonsense. I’ll have plenty of chances to take Rose on a proper date later. Right now, I want a dinner with my family. Please?”

Robert smiled and followed his son into the dining room.

“Looks wonderful, you two,” he praised, seeing the spread of lasagna, salad, and fresh bread. “Want a bottle of wine?”

“Sure,” James said.

“I’ll grab one,” Robert said, walking towards the door to the basement.

Dinner and dessert was a lovely affair, filled with laughter and memories as they all enjoyed their first of (hopefully) many meals together.

“I’m stuffed,” Robert said as they all finished up a plate of Rose’s birthday cake. “Thank you for dinner. I’ll do the washing up.”

“We can help,” Rose protested.

“Nonsense,” Robert said. “James, you look dead on your feet, mate. Go relax for a bit. I can handle a bit of washing up.”

Rose guiltily looked over at James, and had to admit he was starting to look a little drowsy.

“Thanks, Dad,” he said, standing up from the table. “C’mon, Rose. I’ll show you where you can sleep.”

Rose thanked Robert again with a kiss to his cheek before following James upstairs.

She took a cursory glance around as they ascended the stairs, and James cursed under his breath.

“I never even gave you a tour of the house,” he mumbled angrily. “I’m sorry, I can take you on one tomorrow.”
“S’okay,” she said, running her fingers down his forearm. “You’ve a lovely house. It’s so big, though, I feel like I’d get lost in it.”

“It’s been passed down through the generations on my mum’s side,” he explained. “The history can be traced back to the nineteenth century. My parents wanted to fill this house with kids. Just got me, though.”

Rose squeezed his hand and said, “You’re not ‘just’ anything, James.”

He offered her an attempt of a smile before he led Rose to a room across the hall from his.

“Here we are,” he announced, setting her suitcase by the foot of the bed. “Loo’s down the hall. We’ll have to share. Hope you don’t mind. There’s always the guest suite downstairs if you’d prefer.”

“This is perfect,” she assured, glancing around the room. Her eyes landed on a vase of dark red roses on the desk by the window. “James? Are those—?”

He nodded and gestured for her to go to them.

She crossed the room and hovered her fingers around the flowers’ petals, knowing without counting how many there were. She leaned down to inhale their aroma before picking up the little card.

_Eighteen perfect roses for my perfect Rose on her (belated) eighteenth birthday. A very happy birthday to you, my love, and to many more to come. The first of many we get to celebrate together. I love you. James._

“Thank you,” she murmured as she turned back around to face James. She wrapped her arms around his waist and nuzzled her cheek against his chest. “They’re beautiful.”

“Like you,” he said, dropping a kiss to her head.

They stood in a quiet embrace for quite a while until a yawn from James broke the moment.

“Right,” he said, pulling back slightly but keeping his hands on her hips. “Well, ehm, this is goodnight, I suppose?”

“I’m not all that sleepy, yet,” Rose said carefully, noting his reluctance to leave. “If you’re up to it, we could, I dunno, watch a film together or something?”

His face relaxed and he smiled.

“I, ehm, have a TV in my room?” he offered.

“Sounds lovely,” she whispered. “Let me change into something more comfy first?”

James nodded and said, “I’m right across the hall, when you’re ready. Take your time, love.”

Rose changed into a pair of pajama bottoms and a t-shirt before wandering down the hall to the bathroom with her bag of toiletries. She brushed her teeth and washed her face and then stepped into James’s room, shutting the door behind her.

James was lounging on his bed, but he jumped up when she walked in.

“So, Rose Tyler, what are we watching?” he asked. He went to the shelf of DVDs and scanned the titles for something she might like.
“Doesn’t matter,” she said, crawling onto his bed.

“Shall we start a *Lord of the Rings* marathon?” he suggested, holding up the first film over his shoulder as he continued perusing the titles of DVDs.

“Sounds lovely,” she said.

“Brilliant!”

James queued up the film and turned back around to see her lying back on his bed and staring up at the ceiling. He followed her gaze to the constellations painted against the dark blue background.

“That’s amazing!” Rose breathed.

“My dad and I painted those,” James said. “Ooh, about fifteen or so years ago now, I think. Dad loves to paint; I’ll have to show you my bedroom in our San Francisco house someday.”

“Right, your *Lord of the Rings* room,” Rose said. “Your dad and I will have to be in charge of decorating our flat. Give you the awesome bedroom you’re used to.”

“As long as you’re in it, it’s already awesome.”

His cheeks pinkened at his blurted admission, but Rose’s eyes lit up in happiness, and James couldn’t help but lean over and kiss her.

She sighed into the kiss and James tentatively swiped his tongue across her bottom lip. He sucked it into his mouth, like she had done to his that afternoon, and delighted in her whimper of pleasure. He groaned into the kiss when her hands dug into his hair, making his belly swoop deliciously.

He broke the kiss far too soon for either of their liking, but the hot pressure in his gut was getting too intense. He ached for more, but they’d met barely six hours ago. The last thing he wanted to do was rush into anything with Rose.

James inhaled slowly before he rolled away from her. He propped a few pillows behind him and lounged back, opening his arms for Rose. She settled herself against him and rested her head on his shoulder.

“I love you,” he whispered, dropping a kiss to her hair. “So much.”

“I love you, too, James,” she murmured, suddenly feeling drowsy.

She caught herself nodding off every now and then, and suddenly the film was over and she and James were laying down with her head on his chest and his arms wrapped around her waist.

She blinked blearily at the TV, where the credits were rolling, and then over at James. He was fast asleep. She pressed her lips lightly to his forehead before she carefully lifted his arm from her hip.

“No,” he mumbled, putting his arm back where it was and wriggling closer to her.

“Shh, go back to sleep,” she whispered, but his fingers tightened around her shirt.

“Stay,” he murmured, blinking over at her. “Please stay? Please?”

How could she refuse?

“Okay,” she said. “But we need to get under the blankets. It’s a bit cold.”
He grunted out a breath and shuffled around for a few minutes until he was finally under the sheets. He threw back the covers and patted the mattress beside him, and Rose took in a big breath before she lay down next to him.

She rolled over onto her side to face him and shoved one of her hands under her pillow while her other hand rested on the mattress in front of her face.

James rolled to mirror her position, and he slipped his hand under hers so her palm rested against the back of his hand. He spread his fingers so her fingers fell between his, and Rose automatically curled her fingers around his hand.

“This okay?” he asked.

“More than,” she whispered.

“Good,” he murmured, reaching out a leg until his foot touched hers. “Rose?”

“Yeah, love?”

“How long are you going to stay in Scotland?”

Rose gave his fingers a squeeze and murmured, “As long as you want me to.”

“Forever?” he said immediately.

“Hmm,” Rose said contemplatively, and she rubbed her thumb across his when she felt his body tense. “I don’t think I packed enough clothes for that. And mind you, the lease for our flat starts in two months.”

James relaxed and smiled sleepily at her.

“Two months, then?” he asked, lifting her hand to press a kiss to the back of it.

“Sounds good to me;” Rose whispered, slowly stroking his thumb as the exhaustion from the last couple days suddenly struck her.

“M’kay,” James murmured as his eyes drooped shut. “Love you. Nighty night, Rose.”

“Love you, too. Goodnight, James.”
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Wherein we go to Vera's funeral.

James was relaxed and groggy when he awoke the next morning. He was warm and comfortable and content and... And someone was stroking his hair.

He blinked open his eyes to look over at his bedmate.

*Rose!*

James’s breath caught in his throat. Rose was here!

Her fingers ceased all motion when she saw he was awake. She smiled sheepishly and pulled her hand away and tucked it under her chin.

“Didn’t have to stop,” he whined.

Rose giggled and scooted closer to him to continue playing with his hair, scraping her nails gently across his scalp in a way that made him shudder in pleasure.

James wriggled closer to her until he could rest his head on her chest. He wrapped his arm around her waist and draped a leg across hers and nuzzled into the soft fabric of her sleep shirt.

“This is quite nice,” he whispered, enjoying the heat of her body radiating so close to him. He could feel every beat of her heart and the expansion and contraction of her chest as she breathed.

“Yeah,” she murmured, pressing a lingering kiss to his forehead.

“Wish we could stay like this forever,” James mused, knowing that he would never get tired of touching Rose.

“Me too. But I assume we have plans for today?”

James sighed. “Yeah. Getting the funeral arranged, I think. Ought to be fun.”

Rose squeezed his shoulders in sympathy. “Let me know if there’s anything you need me to do.”

“Just stay with me,” he requested.

“Always,” Rose whispered.

They remained in their cuddle until James’s stomach growled in hunger.

“I suppose we should get up,” he yawned. “Lots to do.”

He pressed a kiss to her cheek before rolling away from her. He stood and stretched, groaning when his back popped.
He then heard a sharp intake of breath from Rose.

“What?” James asked with his arms held above his head, mid-stretch.

Rose silently scooted to the edge of the bed and lifted up James’s shirt.

“Ehm, Rose? What’re you—?”

“I didn’t realize…” she whispered, and he felt her fingers graze the swell of his ribs.

Understanding dawned on James, and he tugged his shirt up to his neck.

Rose gasped as she saw the dark, splotchy bruise that spanned from his left hip to his right shoulder.

“Seat belts save lives,” James quipped dryly, “but are murder on the ribs.”

“Oh, God,” she murmured, trailing her fingers across the bruise.

James shivered as goosebumps broke out over his skin at her touch.

“I’m fine, love,” he said when he saw how pale she had gotten. He snatched her hand away from his chest, despite wanting her to keep touching him, and he gave her fingers a squeeze. “Really. I’m fine.”

He let the hem of his shirt fall back to his hips and teased, “Y’know, if you wanted to see me with my shirt off, all you had to do was ask.”

The next several days passed in a blur of planning Vera’s funeral and greeting family members that had stopped by to see how they were doing and to offer their condolences and support. They’d had to politely decline when everyone offered to stay with them to help cook or clean; they frankly weren’t in the mood to host a houseful of people, even if it was just family.

James introduced Rose to his family as they popped by to visit and was delighted when they all took a shine to Rose.

And then the Nobles stopped by after breakfast on the day before the funeral.

James accepted their hugs and condolences, and nodded dutifully to their overused sentiments of “your mum was such a lovely woman, she was too young to be taken from us.”

“Let me introduce you to Rose,” he said, ushering her forward when they stopped hugging him.

“Rose, this is Wilfred Mott, and his daughter, Sylvia Noble, and her daughter, Donna Noble. Wilf is my dad’s mum’s brother, but has practically been my grandfather since I was a boy.”

“Quite right,” Wilf said proudly. “Held you in my arms when you were just three days old.” He then turned to Rose. “So this is the girl that’s stolen our James’s attention at all those Christmas dinners, eh? Nice to meet you, sweetheart.”

“Likewise,” Rose said, accepting his embrace.

“Ehm. Dad’s in the kitchen,” James said, gesturing to the doorway. “The neighbors keep bringing us food. Help yourselves.” He then grabbed Rose’s hand and tugged her back to the living room to continue their *Lord of the Rings* marathon.
“I’ll go get us a fresh cuppa,” Rose said when they both cradled empty mugs in their hands at the end of the movie. “Why don’t you queue up the next film?”

James swapped out the second *Lord of the Rings* for the final one, and lounged back on the sofa, waiting for Rose to come back.

“Was this really the best time?”

James glanced up at Sylvia.

“Sorry?” he said.

“For Rose to come,” Sylvia said.

“I don’t understand,” he said, furrowing his brows at the woman.

“I get it,” Sylvia said. “She’s your soulmate and you’ve been looking forward to meeting her. But I don’t think it’s appropriate for you to be canoodling with your girlfriend in front of your father. You should’ve waited until this tragedy was past.”

James’s ears were ringing as he clenched his jaw against the wave of fury bubbling in his stomach.

“Rose has been the only good thing to come from this shit week,” James said quietly. “She is the only reason I’ve stayed sane throughout this whole ordeal. My dad, too. I’m well aware this isn’t the best time for this. Do you think this is how I wanted to meet Rose? Or how I wanted her to meet all of you? Do you think I didn’t consider waiting until the worst of this was behind us? Do you think I’ve done anything but wish Rose and I were anywhere else in the world because that would mean my mum was still bloody alive?!”

James stood abruptly form the sofa, his chest heaving with anger.

“I’m—” Sylvia at least had the decency to look contrite, but James’s patience had worn out.

“Piss off,” he snarled, storming past Sylvia and then past Wilf.

“Whoa-ho, and where are you off to?” he asked.

“Out,” James growled, needing to be alone and away from all of the bloody family members that had been infesting their house all bloody week.

-oOoOo-

Rose heard raised voices just as she added the second spoonful of sugar to James’s tea, and she looked over at Robert in concern. He sighed wearily, knowing that James often butted heads with Sylvia and occasionally with Donna. He walked out of the kitchen, and Rose followed. Wilf, Sylvia, and Donna were in the living room, but James was gone.

“Mum, what did you say to him?” Donna demanded.

Sylvia’s eyes flickered to Rose, and she had a sinking feeling that she’d been the topic of the argument. But that didn’t matter. Her soulmate was upset and missing.

“Never mind that,” Rose said. “Where is he?”

“Said he was going ‘out’, ” Wilf said.
Rose had an idea of where he was. She checked all of his preferred hiding spots in the house, but when they all turned up empty, she returned to the kitchen and dumped the cooling mugs of tea down the sink before she packed a bag with some snacks. She grabbed a blanket and her shoes and headed out to the backyard.

She retraced the trail James had taken her on the first day she had arrived, but he wasn’t at the fallen log by the little stream, so she turned towards the direction James had told her the lake was, and continued walking.

After about twenty minutes (and a few minutes of panicking that she’d gotten turned around and was lost in the middle of nowhere without her cell phone), Rose eventually made it to the lake, and she saw James sitting under a tree with his arms wrapped around his knees.

“Hey,” she called softly as she walked up to him.

He turned to face her and quickly swiped at his red eyes before smiling.

“Didn’t expect to be found here,” he said.

“Oh. Did you want me to leave you alone?” she asked guiltily.

“Nah, it’s okay,” he said. “As long as you didn’t bring anyone else with you?”

His eyes darted behind her and scoured the tree line.

“No, just me,” she promised, shrugging off her backpack. “I brought some food, if you’re hungry.”

“Yeah, thanks,” he said, opening her bag and pulling out a bottle of water first. He downed half of it at once, then rifled through the rest of her bag, and found a banana. “You sure know the way to my heart.”

“I’m not sure we can be soulmates if you like bananas,” she teased. She unfolded the blanket in her arms and said, “Here, why don’t you sit on this to keep your bum from getting damp.”

He stood and stretched before helping her lay the blanket out, and he sat back down. He spread his legs out in front of him and patted the open space between them in an invitation for her to sit.

She did, and he immediately wrapped his arms around her waist and nuzzled his nose into her hair. He trailed his lips across her neck, making her shiver with pleasure. She sighed happily and leaned back against his chest, then remembered his injured ribs and sat up straight.

“No, you’re fine,” he assured, tugging her back against him and relishing the feeling of having her in his arms.

They both picked at the food she’d brought as they sat in silence and stared out over the still lake water.

“I used to spend all of my time out here when I was a kid,” he said. “When my mum and dad first said something about moving to the United States for a year, I came here and cried a bit because I loved it out here and couldn’t imagine being away from it for a whole year. And in a city, no less.”

“I would too,” Rose said, tracing random circles onto his knees. “S’beautiful out here. So peaceful and quiet.”

“Mum and Dad took me out here to stargaze one night when I was young,” he said, his voice
growing faint as he was lost in the memory. “It was a few days after my tenth birthday, and I’d been upset because I still wasn’t soulmated, and figured I was approaching the cut-off date for being soulmated. If I hadn’t already reached it.”

“You had until your eighteenth birthday,” Rose reminded gently, giving his shins a reassuring squeeze.

“Yeah, but how many people really have a thirteen-year age gap?” he retorted.

Rose shrugged noncommittally. She’d looked up facts about soulmates when she’d gotten more proficient with reading, and she remembered that the last case of that large of an age-gap had happened almost a hundred years ago. The average nowadays was four years, with almost ninety percent of the soulmated population falling into that range or below.

She gave his shins another squeeze. She hadn’t been looking for or expecting a soulmate when James had first written to her. It had been a very pleasant surprise for her. She couldn’t imagine his agony as he lived six years of his life being of age for a soulmate, and wanting and actively seeking a soulmate, but not having one and fearing that he would be without one. Her heart ached for young James.

“Well, I’m here now,” she said firmly.

“That you are,” he said, pressing his lips to the side of her head. “Anyway, what I was saying was that my parents took me out here to show me just how big our universe is. And I remember them saying that in a universe this infinite, even if I didn’t have the special One, there were still plenty of people I could meet and befriend or fall in love with, and that out of all the people in existence, there was no one exactly like me. And that in itself was a miracle. It helped, them putting it in perspective. It still didn’t make me wish for a soulmate any less, but it gave me a bit of hope. And then I found you.”

Rose took his hand from around her waist and pressed her lips to the back of it.

“Love you,” she whispered, leaning her head back against his collarbone.

“I love you, too.”

“We should probably get back before people start to worry,” Rose murmured as they sat in an extended silence.

James sighed and tightened his hold on her and made no move to stand up.

“Do we have to?” he sighed. “It’s all so… overwhelming. And not only with Sylvia this morning. But everyone. The constant influx of visitors. It’s exhausting.”

“I know,” she soothed. “But they just want to help. Everyone is grieving.”

“Can’t they grieve in a less invasive way?” he grumbled, not wanting to admit that he knew Rose was right. “I just want to be alone and not have everyone hug me and tell me they’re sorry and that mum was too young to die. I bloody know all of that! It’s all so suffocating.”

Rose stiffened. “Have I been too suffocating?”

“Absolutely not,” he answered quickly, pressing a quick kiss to the side of her head. “I spent twelve years wanting to touch you and see you and be with you. Four days has not been nearly long enough to sate that desire. Quite honestly, I don’t think the rest of our lives will ever be long enough.”
Rose relaxed back against him and said, “You’ve changed the subject.”

“But talking about you is so much more interesting,” James said, nuzzling his nose into her hair.

“I would have to disagree,” she said, loosening his hold around her waist. “’C’mon, love. We can hang out in your room, if you want, but we should at least be present. If nothing else than to help deflect all the attention from your dad. I can’t imagine how overwhelming this all is for him.”

James looked guilty all of a sudden as he said, “Didn’t even think of that.”

“That settles it,” Rose said. “Come on. Let’s go rescue your dad.”

oOoOo

The fated day of the funeral finally dawned, bringing with it beautiful sunshine and hints of the impending summer’s warmth. It seemed to mock the overall somber attitude of the house.

When Rose awoke, James was already up. He had showered and dressed, but was lounging on the bed beside her, playing a game on his phone.

She smiled sleepily at him, and he tried to return it, but Rose saw the tension in his face. She sighed, wishing she could make him feel better, but knowing she couldn’t. Not today.

Rose got up and showered and dressed, but just as she was finishing her makeup, she heard clattering and muffled cursing coming from James’s room.

She hurried down the hall and saw that his door was shut.

“James?” she asked, knocking lightly.

“Yeah, come in.”

She pushed open the door, and saw him standing in the middle of his room with a bow tie hanging untied around his neck, and shoes scattered across the floor.

“I don’t have any bloody shoes!” he said, running a hand raggedly through his hair, before he froze and cursed and leaped over to his mirror to check and fix the damage. “Bloody fucking hell!”

“James, breathe,” Rose said softly, cautiously walking up behind him. She touched a hand to his shoulder, and his muscles unclenched. “Let me?”

She tugged on his shoulder to get him to face her. She quietly fixed his hair for him, though she knew it would be a mess in a few minutes anyway, what with his penchant for mussing it up. But it was something she could do for him to make the day a little less awful.

Once his hair looked like it did before he ran his fingers through it, she touched the ends of his bow tie.

“Can I?”

He nodded and lifted his chin to give her better access. A few quiet minutes later, she had the tie tied, and she pressed a soft kiss to his cheek.

“Now, shoes,” she said, looking around and at the trainers that littered the floor.

“All I have are these bloody chucks,” he growled, clenching his hands into his fists. “I can’t go to my
mother’s funeral in trainers!”

“The only alternative is barefoot,” she said gently.

James grumbled under his breath and kicked at the black chucks by his feet.

“James, it’ll be okay,” Rose comforted.

“It’s not bloody okay!” he snapped, then rubbed at his eyes. “Sorry. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right,” she soothed. “I can’t imagine how awful today is for you. But I’ll be with you all day.”

“Promise?” he asked, pulling her in for a hug.

“I promise. I won’t leave your side,” she said, pressing a kiss to his neck. “Now c’mon. Let’s get some breakfast.”

“Not hungry,” he mumbled, still holding her tightly.

“Just a piece of toast,” she coaxed.

He sighed and followed her to the kitchen.

Robert still wasn’t out yet, so Rose made up a plate of eggs and toast for them both to share as James made the tea.

James picked at his breakfast, but dutifully ate one piece of toast and an egg.

It was approaching the time they’d wanted to leave, and Robert still wasn’t out. James glanced down the hall worriedly and said, “I’m going to check on him.”

He walked down the corridor that lead to the guest suite, where his dad had been sleeping ever since they’d returned to Scotland.

“Dad?” he asked as he opened up the door.

His dad was sitting on the edge of the bed.

“I can’t do this,” Robert whispered, looking over at James with red, teary eyes.

James walked up to him and perched on the bed beside his dad. He opened his arms and Robert leaned into them, sniffing.

“Never thought I’d be doing this,” Robert croaked. “Not this soon. Figured we’d’ve lived a long and full life together, and if this day ever came for me, I’d be following her relatively soon. But I’m not! I’ve got decades left to go and she was supposed to be here with me!”

James held his dad more tightly, blinking away his own tears as sobs ripped up Robert’s throat.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do without her,” he whimpered. “I just want her back!”

“Me too,” James said quietly. “No one would blame you if you didn’t go, y’know. It’s okay.”

“How can I not go to my soulmate’s bloody funeral?” Robert spat, pulling away sharply and rubbing his hands across his face.
“I’m just saying.”

Robert shook his head wearily.

“She would’ve gone to mine,” he whispered. “So I’m going for her. She deserves that.”

“Then we really ought to get going,” James said gently, standing from the bed.

Robert nodded and followed James to the foyer where Rose was waiting.

They arrived at the church before any of the funeral attendees, and they accepted the condolences of the priest who would be running the service, and the morticians.

The casket was already in place at the back of the church, and Robert walked up to it. He choked out a sob when he saw his wife lying pale and pasty in the coffin and wearing the dress he and James had picked out for her earlier that week when they’d been notified she had arrived in Scotland.

“I miss you, my love,” he whispered, trailing shaking fingers across her cool hands before he carefully pulled up the sleeve on her left arm.

_Don’t forget, we need to pick up milk tonight after dinner xo._

The message was unchanged and unwashed, unlike the ink on his own forearm, which had completely washed off a few days ago, much to his unending distress.

He drew in a shuddering breath as he pulled her sleeve down to cover the message, wanting to keep that last piece of her to himself.

Robert stroked her hand one last time and turned away to see Rose hugging his sobbing son, and he realized with a start that this was the first time that James had seen his mum since their last night together almost two weeks ago.

“Shhh,” Rose murmured, holding him tightly as James gasped in her arms. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

She rubbed his back and murmured soft words of love and reassurances into his ear until he finally quieted.

He sniffled and pulled away and scrubbed his fingers into his eyes. He couldn’t do this. God, he couldn’t do this. He wished he could grab Rose’s hand and leave and never look back, but he couldn’t do that to his mum.

He accepted the tissues that were pressed into his palm and swiped at his eyes and nose. He spared one last look at his mum before he turned his back to her and started greeting the funeral attendees with his dad.

The viewing seemed to last far longer than its allotted ninety minutes. He hugged more people than he wanted to and hardly said anything other than, “Thank you for coming,” which he was effectively removing from his vocabulary henceforth.

He felt Rose’s fingers slip from his when he was enveloped in a tearful embrace from his mum’s parents, and his newly-freed hand automatically went up to return his grandmother’s hug.

He wanted to go and find Rose again, and get away from all of the grieving people, but he was soon enshrouded by a quick succession of people.

He was barely containing his panic when the priest announced that the funeral service would be
beginning in a few minutes, and that Vera’s immediate family should be seated at the front of the
church.

James scoured the church for Rose until Robert rested his hand on his shoulder and gently spun him
around. James breathed out a sigh when he saw her by the memory board.

“I seem to remember you promising you wouldn’t leave my side,” he said when he was standing
beside her. He was trying for a light and teasing inflection, but knew it sounded forced. She’d
promised, and yet she left him alone…

Rose grimaced in apology and reached out for his hand.

“Sorry, I just… felt out of place,” she admitted. “I feel like I’m intruding in your family’s grief,
y’know.”

“No, I don’t.” James said honestly. “The day you were marked as my soulmate, and I as yours, you
joined my family. My mum loved you, Rose. She loved you so much.”

Rose sniffled, and James squeezed her hand.

They turned back to the picture board full of photographs of a beautiful young brunette, ranging from
infancy to adulthood. Rose particularly admired the photographs of Vera with her family; the pure
love she had for her husband and son shone clearly through the photos.

“I wish I could’ve met her,” Rose whispered, staring at the photograph of Vera holding a newborn
James while Robert sat on the bed with his arm around her. She looked positively exhausted, as did
Robert, and both of their eyes were red and puffy, but there was nothing but love and joy in their
faces.

Her eyes followed the progression of photos and watched the family grow together.

“Me too,” James murmured regretfully, moving to stand behind Rose. He wrapped his arms around
her waist and settled his chin on the top of her head, scanning over the pictures of his mum.

He saw his dad approaching them from the corner of his eye. He sighed and dropped a kiss to her
hair. “C’mon, love. Service is about to start.”

oOoOo

James tugged off his bow tie and let it drape around his neck as he walked into the house with Rose
and his dad. *What a day.*

“I’m going to lay down for a bit,” Robert said quietly before turning down the hallway and walking
into the guest suite.

“I think I am too,” James admitted. “Sorry, love.”

“Don’t apologize,” Rose said. “I understand. It’s been a long day.”

anything in the kitchen too.”

“James, I’ll be fine,” she assured. “Go on and take a nap. You look like you could use it.”

He pressed his lips to her forehead and turned around and trudged up the stairs. Rose followed him
and took a pair of sweatpants and a large jumper out of her suitcase before closing the door behind
her to let James get some rest.

She made herself a cup of tea before settling on the sofa with the e-reader she found on the bookcase.

 Barely an hour later, she heard James walking down the stairs. His hair was disheveled and his eyes were bloodshot.

“Couldn’t sleep?” she asked sympathetically.

He shook his head and rubbed his fingers into his eyes.

“Got a hell of a headache,” he mumbled.

“C’mere,” she said, patting the open cushion next to her. “Lay down for a bit. Even if you don’t sleep, the rest will do you good.”

He grabbed two blankets and wadded one up and shoved it next to her thigh to act as a pillow, before draping the other one over himself when he laid down.

“Just close your eyes,” Rose urged, stroking his hair. She massaged her fingers across his forehead, kneading at the spots where she always had pains from a headache. But when he angled his head, she adjusted her ministrations to rub at the places he was indicating.

After a few more circuits between his temples, the ridge of his brow, and his hair, Rose heard his breathing even out.

She continued to mindlessly play with his hair as she read well into the evening.

He slept for nearly three hours before beginning to stir. She ran her fingers through his hair in hopes of coaxing him back to sleep, but he groaned into her touch and rolled over onto his back to look up at her.

“Hello,” he murmured, smiling sleepily at her.

“Hello,” she said, setting the e-reader on the end table. “Have a nice nap?”

“Mhmm,” he grunted, arching his back as much as he could and straightening his legs in a lying-down stretch. “How long was I out for?”

“A couple hours,” she said. “You can keep sleeping, if you want.”

“No, I’m fine,” he said through a yawn. “If I sleep any longer, I won’t be able to fall asleep tonight. Don’t want to muck up my circadian rhythm too badly.”

He remained lying with his head in her lap, enjoying her touch, until he heard her stomach gurgle. He glanced at the clock and realized it was well past dinner time, and he’d kept her trapped on the couch for the last several hours.

“I don’t particularly feel like cooking,” James said. “And if I eat anymore casseroles, I might go mad. Want to order a pizza? Or Chinese?”

“Sure,” Rose said. “Chinese sounds nice. You order it while I pop off to the loo.”

James wasn’t sure what Rose would like, so he ordered a bit of everything, and he mindlessly put a movie into the DVD player.
“Again?” she asked, nodding to the television when she walked into the living room.

James looked up and saw the main menu option for the first *Lord of the Rings* movie playing.

“Oh, bollocks,” he said. “Sorry. Just grabbed the next in line. Forgot we’d already gotten through the series. I’ll put something else in.”

“It’s fine,” Rose said. “I don’t mind.”

“You sure?” he asked dubiously.

She nodded and plopped down beside him on the couch. She then spared a glance down the hall.

“Should we check on your dad?” she asked softly.

James shook his head. “Best let him rest.”

Their food arrived shortly after the movie started, and they mindlessly ate and talked and pressed tender kisses to whatever patch of skin happened to be nearest to their lips.

“Thanks for being there with me today,” James murmured, swirling his chopsticks through the noodles he was eating.

“Of course,” Rose said, tilting her head up to place a soft kiss on his jaw. “I’ll always be there for you, James.”

A knot grew in his stomach; his mum and dad promised that to each other, and look how that ended…

He forcibly shoved aside that thought in favor of holding Rose more tightly to him as they watched Frodo and Sam depart from the Shire.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Wherein James and Rose go on their first formal date together.

James stood in the little church, surrounded by friends and family. The casket was open, but he couldn’t bring himself to look inside it. He instead greeted well-wishers and thanked them for coming, and all the while, he never let go of Rose’s hand.

Then his mum stepped up in front of him.

“I’m so sorry, Jamie,” she whispered, reaching out and cupping his cheeks.

“Mum?” he asked, his heart leaping into his throat. “But you… you’re…”

A sob caught in his chest as he flung his arms around his mum.

“Oh, Mum,” he whimpered, shuddering as tears streaked down his cheeks.

“I know, sweetheart,” she said sorrowfully. “I know. I’m so, so sorry, Jamie. We were all looking forward to meeting her.”

James pulled back in confusion, and he was suddenly aware that Rose was gone.

“Rose?” he called, ripping away from his mum and ignoring the pitying look she was giving him.

He sprinted through the church, desperately looking for Rose. But every doorway led back to the chapel where the funeral service was being held, and that blasted open casket tormented him at every glance.

His dad looked at him sadly, with his arm around his wife. Robert nuzzled his nose into Vera’s hair and James overheard him whisper, “I’m so glad it wasn’t you.”

James felt like he could throw up as he kept shouting Rose’s name but couldn’t find her anywhere. His feet were suddenly taking him towards the casket, even though he wanted nothing to do with that bloody box. His parents’ hands rested on his shoulder, pushing him towards the alter. His legs continued moving forward despite his insistence that he run fast and far away.

He was finally standing right in front of the casket, and he looked down to see the still, pale face of his soulmate cradled by the soft velvet lining.

“No!” he wheezed, falling to his knees. “No, no, NO! It’s not her! It was Mum! Where’s Rose? Where is she?! Rose!”

James wrenched his eyes open and tried to orient himself in the dark room, but he could hardly breathe through the pressure in his chest. He flopped onto his back and panted for air as he scrubbed his hands over his clammy face. He tried to parse through what was real and what was not, but he found it exceedingly difficult when he couldn’t tell if his memories were real or figments of his dreams.
He gasped out a sob, feeling so helpless and overwhelmed, when a small, warm hand touched his chest and started rubbing small circles.

“James, love, breathe.”

His breath caught in his throat as he turned his head to look at Rose. He could hardly make out her features in the dark, and panic clawed through him as his mind’s eye showed him her white, lifeless corpse.

“Rose,” he gasped. “Oh, Rose! I thought you were… my mum, she… I wasn’t… you weren’t…”

“Shhh, c’mere,” she whispered.

His eyes had adjusted enough to see she was holding her arms open for him, and he rolled willingly into them. He scooted close to her until he could feel every inch of her body pressed against his. He threw his arm around her ribs and wrapped his leg around one of hers. He buried his face into her chest and tightened his grip around her until he was nearly on top of her.

“It was just a dream,” she murmured, holding him tightly. “It wasn’t real. It was a dream.”

He shivered in her arms as he forced himself to breathe in her familiar scent and listen to the strong beating of her heart beneath his ear and feel the heat she was exuding around him. She wasn’t dead, she wasn’t dead… She was soft and warm and so alive.

James felt her run her fingers soothingly through his hair, and he gratefully accepted her comfort.

“Why’d all this have to happen?” he mumbled into her shirt. He’d wanted so badly for his mum to meet Rose, and for Rose to meet his mum. His mum loved Rose so much, and James hated that they would never get to meet. It wasn’t bloody fair!

“I don’t know,” Rose whispered, resting her cheek against his forehead. “I don’t know, love. I’m so sorry.”

James sniffled and let the feel and smell of Rose surround him and comfort him.

oOoOo

Later that morning, Rose was awoken by the opening of the door and the rattling of dishes and mumbled curses coming from James. She chuckled at her daft soulmate as she watched him fumble with the door while balancing a tray of food in his hands. She was about to hop out of bed and lend him a hand when he grinned in self-satisfaction and kicked the door shut behind him.

When he turned and saw she was awake and looking at him, his smile broadened as he exclaimed happily, “Good morning, Rose!”

“Morning, James,” she said, sitting up and propping a few pillows behind her. “What’s all this?”

“Breakfast,” he proclaimed proudly, smoothing out the blankets at the foot of the bed and setting the platter of food down.

“Yes, I can see that. Why?”

“I thought it’d be nice to have breakfast in bed together,” he said, scrubbing at the back of his neck. “And I, well, I wanted to thank you for last night.”

Thank you. You didn’t need to do all this, though. Seeing you hurting hurts me. Please don’t be afraid to come to me when you need me.”

“I won’t,” he promised with a soft smile. “And I not only wanted to make it up to you, even if you don’t think I needed to, but I also wanted to have breakfast in bed with you. It’s a proper couple thing to do, isn’t it? I wanted to try it out. If that’s all right?”

“Absolutely,” she said with a grin. “Now come sit before it goes cold.”

James carefully crawled into bed beside her before they tucked into their breakfast.

“Oh, this was lovely,” James said, freshening his and Rose’s tea as they finished the last bites of food. “Best idea my brilliant brain has come up with in a long time! We ought to make this a regular occurrence.”

“Quite right,” Rose agreed, resting her head on his shoulder.

“So-so there’s another proper couple thing I’ve been wanting to do with you too,” James said quietly, tracing random doodles on her thigh. “D’you want to go out to dinner with me? Properly? At a restaurant?”

“Yeah,” Rose said, smiling.

“Tonight?” he asked hopefully.

“It’s a date,” she replied, bumping her shoulder playfully against his.

“Hey, we match!”

James turned towards the staircase at the sound of her voice and felt his heart lurch low in his gut.

“You look… stunning,” James breathed when she walked into the foyer to meet him.

“Yeah?” she asked, smiling shyly and twisting her hips gently to make the skirt of her dress flow around her knees.

“Oh, yes,” he whispered, raking his eyes across the fabric of her dress, and appreciating how nicely the blue fabric accented her skin tone.

A pleased blush pinkened her cheeks and her smile widened as she watched him look her up and down. She used his distraction to give him a once-over. He was in a pair of snug, dark wash jeans that accented his bum rather nicely, and his pale blue Oxford stretched deliciously over his chest before draping around his narrow hips.

“You’re not too bad yourself,” she teased.

He beamed brightly, then held out his hand for hers.

“C’mon, don’t want to be late!” he said.

“We’ve got reservations?” she asked.

“Well, sort of, I suppose. But we’ll be wanting to get there soon for the full ambiance,” he said, tugging her to the car. He opened up the passenger’s side door and held it for her as he continued,
“You’ll see when we get there.”

He hopped into the driver’s seat and took her hand in his as he made the leisurely drive into town.

Rose watched with rapt attention, wanting to take in every detail about the little village James grew up in.

Soon, he was pulling into what appeared to be the driveway of someone’s home but it then widened into a small gravel car park. At the end of it was a small wooden building overlooking a lake.

“It’s the same lake you found me at a few days ago,” he said when he saw her admiring it. He wrapped his arm around her waist and spun her slightly to look out over the waters that were shimmering with the setting sun. He rested his cheek almost against hers and pointed out in front of them. “Right out there. I want to take you out there again for a happier memory of it. But for now, dinner awaits!”

James rested his hand on the small of her back and led her into the little cozy restaurant.

“Table for two on the deck,” James told the host. “Booked under the name McCrimmon.”

“Ah, of course!” he said, smiling at the two of them. “Right this way sir and madam.”

“I hope you don’t mind eating outside?” James asked, glancing down at her nervously.

“Oh of course not,” she said. “It’s such a beautiful evening. It’d be a shame to spend it indoors.”

“My thoughts exactly!” he said. “Ah, here we are!”

Rose gasped as she and James were led to the back of the restaurant, where the back wall was made almost entirely of glass. The host slid open the glass door and led them out to a deck with half a dozen tables spread across the area. There was an elderly couple and a family of six already seated on the deck, and the server led James and Rose to the opposite end.

The view was striking. The deck sat above the lake, and Rose could hear the soft slapping of the waves against the water’s edge as well as the quiet murmuring of the stream that fed into and out of the lake. The sun was beginning to set, wreathing the water in golden flames.

“This is gorgeous!” Rose breathed, stepping up to the railing to admire the view.

“Thought you’d like this,” James said, grinning at her. He stepped up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist and enjoyed the serenity around them.

They were soon interrupted by the waiter, who dropped off the food and drink menus. He smiled at the two of them and guessed, “Newly met soulmates?”

“Yep!” James answered, stepping away from Rose before turning towards their table. “First date.”

Rose glanced up at him as he sat down at the table opposite her. She worried her lip between her teeth as she pretended to peruse the wine list, then chose a glass at random.

James furrowed his brow at her as she immediately lifted the dinner menu and started chatting inanely about the appetizers that sounded good.

“Rose, love?” He touched his fingertips to the top of her menu and tugged on it, urging her to look at him. “Did I say something wrong?”
“I just thought our first date had been the first night we met,” she mumbled, feeling her cheeks heat in embarrassment. “I mean… we took a walk together, and made dinner together, and ate together. I sort of thought that counted.”

James stared at her thoughtfully, then glanced out at the lake and admitted, “I-I didn’t think you thought that counted. Or even wanted it to count. Pretty lame first date, eh? Making your own dinner. Eating with your grieving soulmate and his dad. Not exactly the pinnacle of romance.”

“But it was perfect because it was us,” Rose argued softly.

James smiled shyly and covered her hand with his. “Yeah, you’re right. So, first formal date then? First time out at a real restaurant together? First time I get to see you in a dress.”

He waggled his eyebrows, and Rose giggled as she kicked him lightly in the shins.

They eventually placed their orders and got their food, and wound up stealing bites from each other’s plates as they ate.

By the time they were thinking of dessert, the sun had completely set and the moon and stars were contemplating making an entrance. The fairy lights strung along the deck flickered on, basking them in a muted yellow glow as James heard the acoustic band inside start playing.

“Might I have this dance?” he asked, pushing away from the table and extending his hand towards her.

“You may,” she said with a grin, allowing him to pull her to her feet.

She rested her hands on his shoulders as his went to her waist. They rocked from side to side for a few moments, before James plucked one of her hands from his shoulders and wrapped his arm around her waist and started walking her around in little circles.

Rose tried to stifle her grin as they tripped over each other’s feet a few times, and after a while, James stopped looking embarrassed and joined in the laughter. He pulled her in close and dipped her down, delighting in her giggling shriek before he tugged her up to stand in front of him.

Her cheeks were pink and her eyes were bright and she was so beautiful. His heart had never felt fuller than in this moment, he was sure.

James dipped down and brushed a gentle kiss to her lips, tasting the wine and the hint of garlic from their meal. He pressed his lips closer, smooshing his nose against her cheek as he dropped his hands to the small of her back.

Her hands wrapped around his neck as she helped guide the kiss. He tentatively swept his tongue across her bottom lip, which she parted for him. He sighed into her mouth as his tongue carefully explored the uncharted territory.

He let out a full-body shiver when she tugged on his hair as his tongue slid wetly across hers. He popped his mouth away from hers to pant in a few lungfuls of air, before he covered her lips again, more hungrily this time. Blimey, she tasted so good, and he wasn’t sure if he was dizzy from the alcohol or his building arousal, but all he knew was kissing Rose Tyler was the most pleasurable thing he had ever done.

After another few glorious minutes of snogging, James was aware that Rose was trying to ease them out of the kiss. It was only then that James remembered they were in public, and his cheeks heated at the thought that someone may have been privy to that rather sensuous kiss.
“I really love kissing you,” he admitted when he rested his forehead against hers. He willed his knees to stop shaking and he hoped the pressure at the front of his trousers wasn’t too noticeable to Rose or to passersby.

“Me too,” she whispered, rubbing the tip of her nose against his. She brushed a quick kiss to his tingling, swollen lips before she said, “Fancy sharing a dessert?”

James followed her to the table and picked up his chair to move it beside her.

“To better take a look at the dessert menu!” he exclaimed defensively. But his ears warmed when Rose smirked knowingly at him after he draped his arm around her shoulders.

She dropped her hand to his leg and started rubbing her hand from his knee to upper-thigh. He nearly jumped out of his chair at the first touch, but he eventually found the caress soothing, and he hummed happily as he pressed kisses into her hair.

They finally left the cozy little restaurant after their chocolate cake had been eaten and James noticed that Rose was getting chilled from the cooling night air. He wished he’d thought to bring a jacket, but Rose assured him she was fine.

He drove them home in a comfortable silence, holding her hand the whole time and delighting when she brought his fingers to her lips.

“I had a really nice time tonight,” Rose said as he guided her into the house.

“Yes, me too,” James said, grinning happily at her. He hadn’t had that much fun or felt so at ease since… Well, since before the accident. And his good mood suddenly dropped as he wondered how he could have such a nice night with Rose with all that was going on.

“Shall we continue through the second round of a Tolkien rewatch?” Rose asked, seeing the abrupt change in his mood.

He shoved aside his sudden melancholy and focused on the joy of being with Rose. When she grinned up at him with the tongue-touched smile he loved so much, his belly swooped and he ached to suck that tongue into his mouth.

“We could,” James murmured, stepping closer to her. Her pupils widened slightly and her tongue swept across her bottom lip, making it glisten so temptingly. “Or perhaps we could continue what we started in the restaurant?”

He cradled her cheeks in his hands but made no further move, letting Rose make the final call. He squeaked in surprise and delight when she wrapped her hand around the back of his neck and pulled him down to capture his lips between hers.

He sighed against her lips as a warm, heavy pressure bubbled through his whole body. But he was aware they were still standing in the foyer, where his dad could walk in on them at any moment.

“Let’s take this upstairs?” he suggested.

Rose nodded shyly and lead the way to the bedroom.

Once there, James kicked his door shut behind him to rest his back against it as he pulled Rose closer to him. He pressed a slow, lazy kiss to her lips before kissing his way to her jaw. She let out a soft
sigh and stroked her fingers through his hair, sending hot bolts of pleasure low into his belly.

He nibbled and sucked his way down her jaw line, delighting in her sighing moans and the way she tilted her head up to give him more access. God, she was beautiful.

He scraped his teeth across the side of her neck and down to the juncture of her shoulder. Her fingers tightened in his hair and she groaned as she pressed herself closer to him. Her chest was flush against his and her hip brushed across his growing erection, shooting sparks of pleasure up his spine.

He muffled a whimper into her neck as he tentatively rocked against her and started making his way back up to her lips.

Rose’s lips glided across his in a motion that was becoming familiar and still felt as good as the first night they’d kissed. Her hips were also moving across his rather deliciously, and it was taking every ounce of his willpower to not grab her hips and thrust against her to relieve the aching pressure in his pants.

She nibbled on his lip and scraped her nails across his scalp and pleasure zinged down his spine to harden him further than he thought possible. He moaned and rocked against her blindly, chasing her warmth and the pleasure fizzing in his veins.

His body felt too hot, yet chilled, and his ears were ringing and his mouth felt dry and his knees were threatening to give out as every cell in his body was consumed by Rose and the overwhelming pleasure and arousal he was feeling.

He wrenched his lips from hers and dug his fingers into her waist as he forced the rocking of their hips to cease.

“Stop,” he gasped, shaking with desire and overstimulation. “Stop.”

Rose froze against him and she took half a step away from him.

He took in a deep breath to clear his head once he could no longer feel every inch of her body pressed to his.

“I-I’m sorry,” she stuttered, running her fingers through her hair as she cast her eyes to the floor to hide the redness of her cheeks.

“No, no, no,” he said quickly, reaching out for her hand. “It’s not you. You didn’t do anything wrong. Far from it.”

He let out a self-deprecating chuckle and glanced down at the front of his trousers, where his erection was straining against the zip of his jeans rather comically. Rose followed his gaze, and her cheeks turned pink as she stared at it. Her tongue swiped across her red, kiss-swollen lips, and James bit his cheek against a groan at the desire to feel her mouth on something other than his lips.

“That was bloody brilliant,” he admitted, clenching his fists to keep from putting pressure on the front of his trousers like he so desperately wanted to. “But, ehm… It’s… Ehm…”

“A bit much?” she asked, a soft look of realization crossing her features.

He nodded, embarrassed. He ran his fingers through his hair, feeling how mussed it had gotten from Rose’s hands, and he stared down at his shoes as he mumbled, “Never done this before. It’s brilliant, but overwhelming, and I just…”
“It’s okay,” Rose murmured, rubbing her hands up and down his chest soothingly. “I’ve never done this either. We’re figuring this all out together, yeah? We’ll only go as fast as we’re comfortable with.”

James shrugged and said, “I don’t want you to feel… If you want more, I can…”

“James, what we’ve been doing so far has been plenty,” she said gently. She stepped up to his and cupped her hands around his cheeks to tilt his head up to look at him. “What we just did felt really nice. But I was getting overwhelmed too. I probably would’ve asked to stop soon if you hadn’t.”

“You would’ve?” he asked, hoping she wasn’t just saying that to make him feel better.

“Yep,” she said. She leaned up and pressed a firm but brief kiss to his lips. “Now, how about we change into pajamas and watch a movie together?”

He nodded eagerly.

The situation in his pants had somewhat calmed. He no longer felt like he might explode if he didn’t hump something, but there was definitely a deep, aching need still lingering in his veins. He wasn’t sure how well he would handle lying in bed next to Rose with only thin pajamas separating them.

He toed off his shoes with more force than necessary as he tried to think unsexy thoughts, and definitely not about the way it felt to be pressed up against Rose with her tongue in his mouth and her fingers in his hair and her hips against his… Bloody fucking hell.

“I, erm, I’m gonna make us a cuppa tea?” Rose suggested. “You can, erm, use the loo. If you want. Y’know. Take care of- of, erm…”

Her voice trailed off, but her eyes kept darting to the noticeable bulge at the front of his jeans.

“Right. I’ll be back.”

She fled the room and James felt like he could die of mortification at Rose’s not-so-subtle suggestion.

James scrubbed his hands across his face and mumbled curses into his palms as he grabbed his pajamas and headed to the loo to take care of his insistent hard-on before Rose got back.

oOoOo

“Ehm, Dad? Can I ask you something?”

James scrubbed at the back of his neck as he focused intently on filling the kettle.

“Of course,” his dad answered, and James heard the rustling of papers that indicated his dad had set aside his newspaper to give James his full attention.

But the coil in James’s stomach refused to loosen, so he stared at the kettle, as though his gaze could bring it to a boil faster.

“How did you know… you and Mum… how did you know that… well, when did you know… probably a better word… because I’m not really sure… and I was wondering… because this is all so new… and I’m not exactly sure what I’m supposed to… I’m at quite a loss… and…”

“James, mate, take a deep breath,” his dad instructed in that soothing tone James could never not listen to. He inhaled raggedly and the shaking of his hands lessened. “Now spit it out.”
“How did you and Mum know you were ready for sex?”

James’s cheeks were on fire as he scrubbed his hands through his hair.

His dad chuckled lightly, and James tried not to be offended that his dad was laughing at him about something he already felt self-conscious about.

“If you’re asking me that, then chances are you and Rose aren’t ready,” Robert said bluntly.

“Yeah, but how did you know when to, y’know, progress things?” James asked, finally spinning around to face his dad. It had been a month since Rose had arrived, and they’d yet to do anything but some—rather brilliant, in his opinion—snogging. The furthest anything had progressed was having Rose in his lap, which felt amazing, but even then, they were both fully clothed. He was worried she was getting impatient or bored with the lack of development in a physical relationship.

“That’s something you’ll have to discuss with Rose,” his dad said.

James groaned in frustration and said, “I don’t know how!”

Robert stared at James for a long moment before taking pity on his son.

“Fix up your tea and have a seat,” Robert suggested.

James whirled around just as the kettle started whistling. He poured the water in his mug then added sugar and a dash of milk and grabbed a muffin from his dad’s early morning coffee run and sat at the table.

“I don’t really know what I’m doing,” James admitted, carefully peeling the wrapper off his muffin.

“Neither does Rose,” Robert said carefully. When James stayed silent, he continued. “My advice to you is follow the rule of reciprocity. Whatever she does to you, you should see if she wants you to do that to her.”

“But we’ve not gotten farther than snogging!” James exclaimed exasperatedly. “I don’t know how to tell her I’m ready for more! Because what if she isn’t but then she thinks she has to be just because I’m ready? I don’t want to force her into anything or make her feel like she has to do anything or pressure her into going further than she’s comfortable with because she doesn’t want to upset me.”

Robert raised an eyebrow at James.

“James, you ought to have more confidence in Rose than that,” he reprimanded gently. “And in yourself. You two are soulmates. There is no one in the universe better suited for you than her, and vice versa. You should never be nervous of telling your soulmate anything. You need to trust Rose that she will give you an honest answer when you bring up the idea of progressing your relationship. And you need to be honest with her if she asks. Don’t move faster than either of you are comfortable with, but don’t hide from developing your love. It’s a beautiful thing.”

“And-and what should I expect?” James mumbled to his mug, tracing his fingertips across the lip.

“When we eventually get there.”

“It’s different for everyone,” Robert said, shrugging. “First times are often messy and awkward and imperfect and full of nerves on both ends. Don’t feel badly if things don’t go as perfectly as they do in books or films.”

“Ehm, but she’ll… it’ll be uncomfortable for her, right?” James asked. “I’ve read up on it.”
“It can be,” Robert said. “Again, it all depends on the woman. And the partner. And the, erm, prior preparation. Make sure you’re both ready and comfortable with any step forward you two make together. But have fun with it. Sexual intimacy isn’t supposed to be stressful, it’s meant to be a mutually pleasurable activity.”

James’s cheeks felt like they might melt off, but he appreciated the advice.

“Thanks,” he muttered, downing the rest of his tea.

“Anytime, mate,” Robert replied, and James was still slightly offended by his dad’s amused smirk.

He rinsed his mug and set it out to dry before he bound up the stairs to his bedroom, wondering what Rose might want to do today. He thought maybe they could spend the afternoon at the lake again, or walk into town to see if that old coffee shop he’d loved as a teen was still in business. Or maybe there was something else she wanted to do. This first meeting hadn’t been the one either of them envisioned, but James really wanted her to be enjoying herself and having fun with him, and not for the first time, James worried that Rose was getting restless. After all, she was used to the hustle and bustle of London, not the quietness of a sleepy Scottish town.

He was about to barge into his room when he heard her voice. He peeked into the room and saw her pacing with her phone to her ear.

“Been going half mad waiting around. Yeah, I’ll be back in London this weekend,” she said, scrubbing her hands through her hair. “I haven’t said anything to him yet… Yeah, I know. I’ll tell him today. Yeah. See you soon, Mum.”

James’s heart plummeted into his stomach as he sniffed hard and clenched his hands into a fist. So there it was then: Rose was getting bored of her time here. No matter. He wouldn’t make her stay any longer; she could be on a plane home tonight if that was what she wanted.

His chest ached with hurt and betrayal, as well as anger and frustration. If he couldn’t keep Rose interested in a day-to-day life with him for a month, how could he do it for the next sixty years?

He knocked lightly on the door to his bedroom.

Rose turned around and smiled at him, but he couldn’t quite return the expression.

Her eyebrows furrowed as she said, “Gotta go, Mum. Love you!” She set her phone down and walked up to him. “Everything all right, James?”

“Anything you want to tell me?” he asked harshly, and he almost felt bad for the way she flinched away from him.

“I don’t understand,” Rose said, her bottom lip quivering.

“Oh, don’t lie to me Rose,” he spat, and seeing her welling tears only made him angrier. “I just heard you. Being with me for four weeks is driving you barmy? Going half mad waiting around? So, what, exactly? You need to escape to London for the weekend to get rid of me? When were you planning on telling me? Or weren’t you, and would I have woken up one morning to see you’ve packed up and left? Have I really been that awful? I thought we were doing well. Having fun. I mean, I know this meeting hasn’t been all sunshine and rainbows, but I didn’t exactly plan for this! But go on. Go home. Be with your mum. Visit your friends. You should’ve just bloody told me you needed a break from me, instead of sneakily behind my back! No need to spare my bloody feelings!”
Anger sparked in Rose’s eyes through her tears.

“You’re a twat,” she hissed, swiping away a fallen tear. “How dare you accuse me of wanting to be away from you, or of lying to you! These last four weeks with you have been the best of my life. No, this isn’t the meeting I had imagined for us. But it’s been perfect despite all the shit that’s happened. And d’you know why it’s perfect? Because it’s us!”

James was confused and more than a little embarrassed.

“Then what—?”

“I’ve got my orientation at Oxford this weekend!” Rose shouted, and James felt a hard knot settle uncomfortably in his stomach. “And I was going to ask you to come with me, because I wanted you to be there with me and I want you to meet my mum and I didn’t want to go three days without seeing you. But if you’re going to be such a bloody arsehole, I’ll go myself!”

Rose stormed passed him, but James barely realized it through the shame buzzing through his body.

“Fucking shit,” he mumbled, rubbing the heels of his hands into his eyes. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

He stepped out of his room only to see that the door to the guest bedroom—the room Rose hadn’t spent a night in since she’d gotten to Scotland—was closed.

James sighed and walked past it and to the kitchen.

“All right, mate?” Robert asked carefully from the living room. “I heard raised voices.”

“I’m a bloody twat,” he sighed forlornly. “And I said some really awful things to Rose and now she’s angry with me. I’m gonna make her a cake and see if she’ll let me apologize.”

James quickly and efficiently mixed all of the ingredients together for the cake.

Waiting for it to finish baking was the worst. All he wanted was to knock on Rose’s door and beg for her forgiveness, but she was still probably furious. Best give her a bit of time to cool down, he thought.

Speaking of cooling, James started on the frosting for the cake as it cooled on the counter.

When he was finally satisfied with his confectionery creation, he sliced off a generous piece for Rose, grabbed a fork, and made his way upstairs. He stood in front of the closed door for several long seconds before he took in a deep breath and knocked hesitantly.

After a few seconds, he heard Rose tell him to come in.

She was lying on the bed, and his heart broke when he saw her red, puffy eyes.

“Rose, I’m so sorry,” he said, standing in the doorway.

“Why would you say those things to me, James?” she asked, sitting up and hugging her knees to her chest. “It hurts that you would think I would leave you like that. That I’ve gotten bored with you. And moreover, that I’ve been lying to you about how much I’ve enjoyed my time with you.”

“I know,” James whispered, staring at his feet.

“I love you with everything that I am,” Rose said quietly. “And for you to just say those things tells me that you don’t think I do.”
That hard knot of shame grew bigger as he heard the utter heartbreak in her voice. The heartbreak he caused. He was such a bloody idiot.

“I know,” he whispered, blinking back the stinging in his eyes. “I really, truly know that you love me. I promise. I’m so sorry I made you doubt that. I’m so sorry, Rose. I just… I got so scared.”

“Of what?” she asked gently.

He shrugged a shoulder. “You’re so wonderful. And I’m… I’m a mess. I can hardly remember these last few weeks, to be honest. I remember being so happy to have you, but individual moments are fuzzy. Like they all happened to someone else and I can’t quite access the memories. For all I know, we’ve been watching *Lord of the Rings* on repeat for four weeks and you’ve finally realized how bloody boring I am and will want to go back to London where your friends and family are. I had so many plans, Rose. I wanted to do so much with you for our first meeting, because you deserve the absolute best. You deserve more than what I’ve been able to give you, and I’m so sorry, Rose.”

The plate of cake was taken out of his hands and was replaced with Rose’s hand. She guided him to the bed and urged him to sit down.

“James, listen to me very carefully,” she said firmly yet gently. “I know that this isn’t what either of us envisioned for our first meeting. But like I told you earlier, it has been absolutely perfect because it’s us. You are my soulmate, James. The love of my life. My very best friend. And I’m so happy and grateful to be here with you, regardless of everything else.”

His little sniffle broke her heart, and she wrapped her arm around his waist. He leaned against her, and Rose rubbed his back slowly.

“And we’ve done more than watch *Lord of the Rings* on repeat,” Rose murmured. “We’ve made dinner together almost every night. Except for the nights you took me out. We first went to that lovely Italian restaurant overlooking the lake, and we danced under the stars. It was one of the most perfect nights of my life.”

A tear dripped down his cheek and James clenched his jaw to keep more from joining them.

“And you took me on a picnic to the lake last week,” Rose continued softly, holding him tighter when she heard his breath hitch. “And you, me, and your dad served dinner at the homeless shelter for the last three Sundays and Thursdays. Funny, almost everything we’ve done over the past month has had something to do with food…”

James let out a watery chuckle through the tears silently streaming down his face. He leaned into her embrace and whispered, “I’m so sorry.”

“I know,” she murmured, kissing his forehead. “I forgive you. Just… please believe me when I tell you that being with you makes me happier than I’ve ever been. I could never get bored with you or want to leave, unless you were leaving with me.”

“Okay,” he said. “Ehm. If-if you still want me to, I’d love to go to your orientation with you? And meet your mum?”

“I’d love you to come,” Rose said, resting her head atop his. “I love you.”

“I know you do,” he whispered, twining his fingers through hers. “I love you, too. I’m so sorry I’m such a twat.”

“It’s been a rough month,” Rose said. “Doesn’t excuse you for being a twat. But I understand.”
James chuckled into her shoulder and said, “I brought you cake as a peace offering.”

“I saw,” Rose said. “Looks yummy. Want to share?”

He nodded and Rose reached over to the bedside table for the plate of cake. She snuggled up against James’s side and relished the way he wrapped his arm around her. She was so content with her life and with James, and her heart broke for him that he’d been so unsure of himself.

“What do you want to do today?” she asked quietly as she passed the fork to him.

“Dunno,” he said. “I had a couple ideas, but what would you want to do?”

“Dunno, what do you want to do?” she teased, bumping her shoulder against him playfully.

“We could go back and forth like this all day,” he said dryly.

“Then I guess you better pick an activity.”

He shook his head and rolled his eyes but asked, “D’you want to walk into town? It’s a lovely day, and it isn’t all that far. There are a bunch of little shops. And a coffee shop I used to love hanging out at during my summers here. But if you’d prefer something else, we can do that.”

“Nope, that sounds lovely,” Rose assured.

James hummed happily and returned the fork to her as they continued to trade off bites until the cake was finished.
Wherein James and Rose visit London, and they take a forward step with their physical relationship.

Chapter rating: Mature

Rose took in a deep breath as she gave their taxi driver her home address. She bounced her knee and looked out at the familiar landscape of London, just beginning to bustle with Friday evening traffic.

James slid his hand onto her thigh and gave her knee a squeeze.

“All right?” he murmured.

Rose gave him a tight smile and said, “Yep.”

James pressed his lips together, and they both knew she’d been caught. She sighed and glanced out the window and said, “I live on a council estate, James.”

“I know,” he said, furrowing his brows.

“Only two bedrooms. One bathroom. A tiny living room and an even tinier kitchen.”

“Rose, I don’t care,” he said, quickly cottoning on to where she was going with this. “Really. I don’t care about any of it. I thought we’d gone over this.”

“Doesn’t make it less embarrassing now that you’re about to actually see my flat.”

“Please don’t be embarrassed, love. Because what I care about and love is you. Not your-your social status.”

He grimaced at the word, and Rose giggled; he sounded like someone out of the nineteenth century, but he was pleased with himself that he’d gotten her to smile.

Her face suddenly sobered and she said, “I just don’t want to feel like a burden to you.”

“What? You’re not!”

“You might not feel that way, but I do,” she said. “This isn’t some film where the rich bloke snags the poor girl and dotes on her and lavishes her in all the ways she dreamed of and she’s absolutely starry-eyed for him.”
“But—”

“Being poor isn’t beautiful or romantic. It’s hard,” Rose said, her speech speeding in agitation. “My mum is going to want to retire in twenty-five years or so, and what’s she going to retire to? She’s accumulated nothing despite working hard every day for the last twenty years, and I’ll want to help her as much as I can but I don’t want to put that burden on you, too. It’s not fair.”

James’s eyes widened the longer she spoke, and he finally realized that despite him having told her that it didn’t matter to him that money was tight for her and her mum, she didn’t quite believe him. Or at the very least, it still made her uncomfortable.

He took her hand in his and murmured, “Look at me?”

He waited a moment before she turned her head and he saw tears glittering in her eyes.

“Oh, Rose,” he whispered, leaning over to press a kiss to her forehead. “I know that being poor isn’t something to glorify. And I’m not trying to romanticize it or anything. Rose, you must understand that I will do whatever I can to make you happy. Because it makes me happy. God, I think I fall a little more in love with you every time you smile at me and I want to give you everything. It makes me so happy to give you things and watch your eyes light up. I honestly and truly do not care what is in your bank account. Or your mum’s. It’s you I fell in love with. The rest is just details, love.”

Rose smiled uncertainly at him, and gave his fingers a squeeze.

A few minutes later, the taxi pulled up to the Powell Estate. James payed the driver and grabbed their suitcase before he let Rose tug him into the tall building.

They hiked up several flights of stairs and Rose finally tugged him onto a landing and to flat number forty-eight. She unlocked the door, pushed it open, and called out, “Mum, it’s us!”

A middle-aged blonde woman rushed in from another room, wiping her hands on a towel.

“Rose! Oh, I’ve missed you!”

Rose opened her arms for her mother and was nearly knocked back a step from the force of Jackie’s embrace.

“Let go of me a second,” Rose said. “I want to introduce you to James. Properly.”

But Jackie was already letting go of Rose and stepping towards James.

“How are you doing, sweetheart?”

The tenderness in Jackie’s voice made James’s eyes sting and a lump swell in his throat, and before he could even say a word, he was tugged into a tight hug. He stiffened for a just a moment, his hug quota having been filled all month by well-wishers. But then Jackie started rubbing his back and called him “sweetheart” again, and he returned her embrace just as fiercely.

He clenched his teeth until his jaw ached as he let Rose’s mum hug him and soothe him, and he was torn between wanting to run away and stay in her embrace for a few moments longer.

Jackie finally let him go and turned back to Rose.

“I invited Mickey and his gran for dinner,” she said. “They should be here soon.”

“Perfect,” Rose said. “I’m gonna go put our stuff in my room and freshen up a bit.”
Rose took James’s hand and guided him into a room just off the main living room.

James immediately took a look around, grinning at all of the evidence of their life together. Rose’s bookshelf was lined not by books, but by twelve glass vases from all of her birthday roses. His family’s Christmas cards were all taped to the wall around the bookshelf.

The books they’d read together were in piles around the room, as were various sketch pads and art supplies.

It looked exactly like he’d imagined.

“It’s a bit small,” Rose said, “but…”

“It’s perfect,” he interrupted. He stepped up to her and pressed his lips to her forehead.

The both took turns using the bathroom, washing up from their travels, and returned to the kitchen just in time for the oven to beep and a knock to sound on the door.

“Must be them,” Jackie said as she took dinner out of the oven. “Get the door, Rose?”

James glanced awkwardly between Jackie and Rose, unsure of what to do or where to stand, and so he leaned casually against the doorway to the kitchen and watched Rose open the front door and embrace an elderly woman and a young man.

“It’s so nice to see you, sweetheart!”

“It’s lovely to see you, too,” Rose said. “You too, Mick.”

“That him, then?” the young man asked, looking up at James.

Rose beamed at him. She gently touched the old woman’s arm and looped her arm through it before walking towards the kitchen, and James realized with a start the woman must be blind. Or at least going blind.

“Rita-Anne, I’d like to introduce you to James,” she said. “James, this is Rita-Anne. I think I’ve told you about her before.”

“It’s so lovely to meet you in person,” James said, taking Rita-Anne’s extended hand.

“You too,” she said. “Our Rose here always spoke so fondly of you.”

James wagged his eyebrows at Rose.

“You’re one lucky bloke,” Rita-Anne said, and her tone sharpened. “Don’t you ever forget it.”

“I won’t,” he vowed. “I never could.”

“Good,” she said, nodding resolutely. She then turned in the direction of the oven and said, “Smells wonderful, Jackie.”

“Oh, James, this is Mickey,” Rose said. “Mickey’s been my mate since I was little.”

James shook Mickey’s hand as well.

“Rita-Anne was like a second Mum to me growing up,” Rose said to James. “When Mum was being difficult about you and me, Rita-Anne was there for me.”
“I didn’t realize she was blind,” James said.

“It’s only been within the last couple years that it’s gotten really bad,” Rose explained. “Last year she fell down the stairs because she couldn’t see that the carpet was uneven. Nearly broke her neck. Scared her enough to go see a doctor and fix up her flat enough to avoid tripping hazards.”

“She seems like an incredible woman,” James noted, remembering how fondly Rose always spoke of her.

“Oi, if you two are quite done whispering sweet nothings,” Jackie interrupted, “dinner’s ready.”

Dinner was a lovely affair, with good food and great company, and James thoroughly enjoyed himself. He loved hearing the stories that Jackie and Rita-Anne recounted about Rose when she was little, and while Rose looked slightly embarrassed by some tales, she was grinning the whole time and added her two-cents to a story every now and again.

The five adults chatted long into the night, until the bottle of wine was completely polished off. James felt warm and drowsy and wanted nothing more than to curl up beside his Rose and fall asleep.

Everyone else seemed to be as sleepy as him, because Rita-Anne and Mickey left shortly thereafter. Once the mess from dinner had been cleaned, James finally thought he and Rose would be free to collapse in bed.

Except…

“Oh, no you don’t,” Jackie said sternly when she saw Rose and James heading for Rose’s room.

“Mum, what—?”

“I don’t want any shagging going on under my roof,” Jackie warned with a sharp glare. “You may be soulmates, but this is still my flat. And I say himself has to sleep on the couch.”

“Mum!” Rose hissed as James let out a squeaking noise of protest.

“Oi, don’t you ‘Mum’ me,” Jackie said. “I know what it was like to be young and in love.”

Rose groaned and scraped her hands over her face, but she knew she would never win this argument with her mum.

“Can he at least take my bed and I’ll take the sofa?” she asked. “He’s far too tall for the couch.”

“I don’t mind,” James said quickly.

“You’ll get a crick in your neck,” Rose said. “And you’re still healing.”

“Rose, I’m fine,” he assured.

“Nope, you’re getting the bed,” Rose said with a tone that said the discussion was closed.

Rose followed him to her room, where she took a set of pajamas out of her dresser.

“I suppose this is goodnight, then,” she said, turning back to face him with her pajamas tucked under her arm.

“Yeah,” he said forlornly. “Are you sure I can’t convince you to take your own bed?”
“Nope.”

“Is there any way to convince your mum that nothing untoward would be going on even if we did share the same bed?” he asked hopefully. He’d gotten quite used to falling asleep and waking up with Rose.

“Probably not,” Rose sighed. “It’s only for three days. We’ll be fine.”

She leaned up on her tiptoes brush a gentle kiss to James’s lips. His arms wrapped around her to hold her close as their lips moved leisurely across each other’s. They kept the kiss relatively chaste, knowing Jackie was just down the hall, but enjoyed the warmth and buzz of pleasure that even a soft press of lips gave them.

James heard Jackie walking down the hall, and he reluctantly broke the kiss. He rested his forehead against hers and murmured, “Love you.”

“Love you, too,” she answered. “You all set in here?”

James nodded, despite the anxiety clenching in his gut. He hadn’t spent a night alone since their first meeting, and he wasn’t particularly looking forward to three nights of it. But Rose seemed to be fine, and he didn’t want to seem overly clingy. Well, more clingy than he knew he’d been over the last month.

“Yep. Nighty night, Rose.”

He pressed a lingering kiss to her forehead before letting her walk back to the living room.

He sighed and rubbed his fingers into his eyes. He shut the door and stripped down to his pants and a t-shirt and settled into bed.

Try as he might, he couldn’t fall asleep. He tossed and turned, and even when he did manage to fall into a shallow sleep, his dreams kept him from getting much rest. The second time he awoke gasping and reaching for the bedmate that wasn’t there, he tossed the covers off of himself and stepped out into the hallway.

He navigated his way to the living room and saw Rose fast asleep on the couch.

He exhaled raggedly, and turned away from her. He shouldn’t disturb her.

James instead walked to the kitchen and filled a glass with water. As he slowly sipped on it and worked on slowing his breathing and his heart rate, he felt a pair of warm arms wrap around his waist. He squeaked in surprise and nearly dropped his cup, but when he realized who was hugging him, he set his glass on the counter and turned in her arms to embrace Rose properly.

“You okay?” she asked, her voice still thick with sleep.

“Yeah,” he murmured, nuzzling his nose into her hair. “Couldn’t sleep, is all.”

“Bad dreams?” she guessed.

He nodded, feeling a little pathetic that he, a grown man of twenty-three, still wanted a cuddle after a nightmare.

“Sorry, love,” she whispered, tightening her arms around him. “C’mon. Lay down with me a bit.”

“But your mum…”
“Never mind my mum,” she said. “It’s only for a little bit. She’ll never know.”

James’s heart sank when he realized Rose would eventually kick him back to his own bed, but for the time being, he gratefully followed her to the sofa. Rose settled onto it and wriggled back as far as she could go before she opened her arms for James.

He crawled into them eagerly, letting her be the big spoon for once. He’d always enjoyed holding Rose, and being held by her was equally as pleasing. He hummed in contentment and let his eyes flutter shut.

He focused on the warmth of her through his thin t-shirt, and the feel of her bare legs against his, and the weight of her arm resting against his ribs. He took her arm and hugged it to his chest as he wriggled closer to her embrace.

She gave him a gentle squeeze and brushed a soft kiss to his neck, and he thought he might actually combust with the heat and love sparking through his veins.

“I love you so much, Rose,” he murmured, feeling drowsy and so, so loved.

“I love you too, James.”

James matched his breathing to hers until he was finally relaxed enough to fall asleep.

oOoOo

“I suppose I should’ve known better than to think you’d actually stay in your room.”

James squeaked in surprise when he blinked open his eyes and saw Jackie staring down at them in amusement. Rose’s chest shook against him as she laughed and loosened her hold around his stomach.

“I’m not… we didn’t…”

“Oh, I know you didn’t,” Jackie smirked. “Don’t reckon you two have enough practice with keeping quiet yet.”

“Mum!”

James wanted to crawl into a hole, but he forced himself to smile and said, “Well, rest assured, Jackie, that Rose and I haven’t had practice with much of anything yet. Pardon me.”

Rose helped him untangle from the blankets before she watched him scurry down the hallway, into her bedroom, then to the loo.

“You really haven’t shagged yet?” Jackie asked dubiously.

Rose’s cheeks flamed and she shook her head.

“We’re taking it slow,” Rose mumbled.

Jackie nodded and said, “You’ve been remembering to take your pill every day?”

“Oh!” she hissed, glancing down the hall to make sure James hadn’t overheard. She hadn’t told him she’d started taking birth control a few weeks before her eighteenth birthday. She hadn’t wanted him to think she was being too presumptuous.
“Just saying!” Jackie said with her hands up. “Don’t want any accidents to happen before you’re both ready for one.”

Rose groaned into her hands. “Don’t worry. We’re nowhere close to doing anything that would result in any accidents.”

Jackie picked up on Rose’s frustrated tone, and said, “Does he not want to?”

“I think he does,” Rose admitted. James almost always had an erection whenever they’d snogged, but he would stop what they were doing before Rose could suggest continuing. Did the idea of sex with her make him uncomfortable? Or was he just as nervous as she was, and didn’t want to press for too much too quickly? As much as she was ready to move forward, she wouldn’t unless he was ready too.

“Only go as fast as you’re comfortable with,” Jackie said softly. “You and James, both. Just not under my roof, please.”

Rose snorted out a laugh as she stood from the couch to start breakfast. She had a long day of orientation ahead of her.

oOoOo

“Oh, this campus is gorgeous!” Rose whispered in awe as they disembarked the bus.

James squeezed her fingers and hummed in agreement. He glanced around, and a familiar street name caught his eye.

“Oh, right down that road will be our flat!” he said happily. “We could walk in to campus everyday if we want!”

James followed Rose as she checked in for her springtime orientation. It was more like a welcome reception, in James’s opinion, as Rose and her fellow humanities students were introduced to their respective programs and given a tour of campus. She would get a more thorough orientation come August when the semester started.

Rose enthusiasm was infectious, and James took her hand in his and swung it lightly between them as they walked around campus. At one point when it seemed as though the tour was drawing to a close, they veered off to take a look at the science department for James, and to scope out the other buildings on campus.

“This is so exciting!” Rose squealed when they walked around the library. Students taking summer classes were milling around, but otherwise it was fairly empty. “I can’t wait!”

James grinned at her, so happy to see her happy. He knew she’d been nervous about starting uni, and he hoped she remained this positive and confident when their semester started.

They rejoined Rose’s classmates, and James dutifully sat through the numerous informational sessions. They were shuffled from room to room to hear about scheduling and classes and financial aid and student life and all of the other things James had forgotten came with new-student orientation.

It was nearing suppertime when the orientation day drew to a close. They walked back to the bus station and boarded a bus headed to London.

“So, for dinner,” Rose said conversationally as the bus pulled into the station. “There’s a great
chippie a few blocks away. That sound okay?”

She wrung her hands in her lap. He’d taken her to such lavish and gorgeous restaurants, and here she was, offering him a greasy hole-in-the-wall chippie.

“Sounds great!” he enthused.

They disembarked the bus, and Rose twined her fingers through his as she tugged in him the right direction.

They made it there quickly, and placed their order, but when James reached for his wallet, Rose stopped him.

“Let me?” she asked.

“But I—”

“Please?” she begged.

James nodded and ushered her towards the cashier while he took their food and found an open table at the back of the restaurant and waited for Rose to join him.

She scooted into the booth beside him and immediately popped a chip into her mouth. A protest that she could’ve let him pay was on his lips, but he remembered back to their conversation from yesterday, and he snapped his jaw shut.

“Thank you for dinner,” he said instead, wrapping his arm around her as he ate his dinner one-handed.

Rose chattered excitedly about all of the new information she had gotten from her orientation, and she picked James’s brain about his own university experience.

She was so beautiful when she was excited, James thought. Her eyes were glowing and her cheeks were flushed, and James could hardly help himself when he cradled her jaw in his hand to guide her in for a kiss.

She smiled against his mouth, but then returned the pressure of his lips, twining her hands through his hair to adjust the angle of the kiss and deepen it.

As much as she wanted to let her tongue explore the contours of his mouth, she remembered that they were in public and she eased them out of the kiss.

“Blimey,” James murmured, licking at his kiss-swollen lips.

“I’ve missed kissing you like that,” Rose admitted. She loved her mum dearly, but her no-PDA-in-the-flat rule was driving her barmy.

“Me too. I don’t suppose we could just spend the night in a hotel,” James mused. “So I can kiss you as long as I’d like.”

“Is that all we’d be doing?” Rose teased, biting her lip as she skated her fingertips up and down his thigh.

His lungs hitched and his pupils dilated as his cheeks reddened.

Rose burst into giggles at his flustered expression, and she leaned over to kiss his cheek.  
“I do eventually, but for now, what we’ve been doing has been perfect,” she assured.

James’s shoulders relaxed as he said, “For me, too.”

oOoOo

“Have a nice trip?” Robert asked when James and Rose walked through the door.

“Yes,” he said. “Met Rose’s mum. Lovely woman. Still a bit terrifying.”

“James,” Robert reprimanded.

Rose rolled her eyes at James and said, “Oh, you know you love her.”

“Only because she made you,” he said sweetly.

Rose rolled her eyes again, and Robert shook his head at the two of them. *Pair of nutters.*

“There are some leftovers in the fridge if you’re hungry,” he said, turning back to the kitchen to clean up the mess from dinner.

James followed his dad into the kitchen, feeling a bit peckish, while Rose bound up the stairs for a shower. James grabbed a slice of homemade pizza from the fridge and scarfed it down as his dad cleared up the dishes.

“So, I was thinking,” Robert said quietly as he loaded the dishwasher with more care than necessary.

James leaned against the counter, giving his dad his full attention.

“I don’t think I want to move back to San Francisco,” Robert admitted quietly. “I couldn’t… Without your mum there… And with you being in England… I don’t think I’d do well in that house by myself.”

James nodded in agreement. Even with himself and Rose to keep him company, there were still far too many nights when James caught his dad looking at old photo albums with an empty bottle of wine beside him.

“Want help packing up the house?” he offered, knowing that was what his dad was trying to get at.

“Would you?” Robert asked, finally looking over at James.

“Of course.” James walked over and rested a hand on his dad’s shoulder, an invitation for a hug if his dad wanted it.

Robert did, and he leaned against James.

“All you ever need to do is ask,” James said, parroting the words he’d been told time and time again by his parents.

“Thanks, mate,” Robert murmured. “I’ll try and make it a quick trip. Get you back to Rose as soon as I can.”

James stiffened. For some reason, he’d assumed Rose would be coming with them.
“Ehm… could Rose maybe tag along?” he asked. “Unless you’re getting tired of seeing me with her?”

“Of course I’m not!” Robert protested. “Remember what I told you… soulmates are a beautiful thing. I will never begrudge you your happiness, James. Or Rose’s. I love you both too much for that.”

James exhaled in relief.

“See if Rose wants to come,” Robert said.

James nodded and retreated to his room for the night.

Rose had just gotten out of the shower and had put on soft cotton shorts and a t-shirt and was working on towel-drying her hair. She was bent away from him as she vigorously rubbed the towel through her hair.

He leaned up against the door frame as he watched her, getting quite a lovely view of her bum.

“Enjoying the show?” she asked dryly, tossing the towel towards the hamper.

“Since you asked,” he drawled, stepping into the room, “yes, I am.”

Rose grinned saucily at him, her wet, pink little tongue poking teasingly out at him. He walked up to her and rested his hands on her hips, and shivered in desire when Rose placed her hands on his chest and scratched lightly at the fabric of his shirt.

James leaned down as Rose leaned up, and he sighed when their lips met. While he had enjoyed his trip to London with Rose, he’d very much missed kissing Rose whenever and however he pleased.

He opened his mouth for her, but whimpered when she pulled back.

“Pizza?” she guessed, smirking up at him.

His cheeks heated as he realized he could taste the lingering garlic in his mouth.

“Sorry, love,” he said. “Let me go and…”

“It’s fine,” she assured. “I was just teasing. Now, I think we were in the middle of something?”

James rubbed his nose against hers and murmured, “Were we? Hmm, I think I need a reminder.”

Rose cupped her hand around the back of his neck to tug him into a firm kiss. He hummed in pleasure against her lips and wrapped his arms around her waist before he carefully walked them backwards until the backs of his knees hit his bed.

James’s lips parted with Rose’s briefly so he could sit on the bed and scoot back to the headboard before urging her into his lap. He wrapped his arms around her waist as he caught her lips between his again, the warm, solid weight of her in his lap almost second-nature by now and very much missed after their time in London.

His hands wandered under her shirt, as they’d done more often when they snogged, and he shivered when his fingers skated across the smooth expanse of her back. He skated his fingers up the muscles of her back, enjoying the feel of the soft flexing of skin under his fingertips.

Rose popped her mouth away from his.
“You can take it off, if you want,” Rose murmured as she trailed her lips down the slope of his jaw to suck at the skin below his ear.

He shuddered and arched into her touch.

“I—what?”

“My shirt,” she said, sitting back on his thighs.

James looked up at her through heavily lidded eyes, still trying to piece together what she had said.

She shrugged and bit her lip, examining him for a moment before she took in a deep breath. She grabbed the hem of her shirt and deftly tugged it over her head, revealing more skin than James had ever seen before.

Oh, God, she was beautiful. James hovered his hand over the pale skin of her stomach as his eyes were glued to her bra. It was a simple thing of white cotton, but to him it was the sexiest bra in the world.

“This okay?” she asked nervously, squirming under his scrutiny.

“Nearly,” he said, getting the urge to feel her skin against his. He grunted and wriggled around and nearly clipped her jaw with his forehead as he tried to get his own shirt off without displacing Rose from his lap.

She giggled above him as he cursed under his breath, and he couldn’t help but join in, particularly when his elbow got stuck in his sleeve.

“Here, let me,” Rose chuckled.

She helped him untangle from the fabric, and soon, his shirt was in a pile next to hers.

Her eyes roamed up and down his bare chest. It was broader than she was expecting, and tapered down around his ribs and to his narrow hips. Her fingers hovered over his sparse dusting of chest hair before she scraped her nails through it, delighting in his deep moan of pleasure.

James arched into her touch as his own hands continued to wander and explore the newly-revealed skin.

After the fifth time his hands had skated over the clasp of her bra, Rose murmured that he could take it off if he wanted.

“You want me to?” he asked, his heart thumping heavily in nervousness and anticipation.

She nodded shyly and reached around to do it for him. His tongue swelled in his mouth (and something else swelled further in his pants) as her bare breasts were revealed to him for the first time. They looked so soft and smooth and oh-so touchable as her dark pink nipples tightened invitingly.

“Beautiful,” he whispered reverently as she let her bra fall to the floor with their shirts.

He tentatively hovered his hands over her breasts and glanced up at her to gauge whether this was still okay. Her pupils were blown wide open as she nodded her consent and pushed her chest into his awaiting hands.

He hummed appreciatively as he cupped her breasts, rolling the soft flesh around in his fingers and memorizing the sounds she made whenever he squeezed a certain way. He flicked his thumb over
her puckered nipples, and she whimpered out a breath and scraped her nails down his chest, teasing his own nipples deliciously.

He was throbbing in his pants, had been ever since she climbed into his lap, and he felt so on edge. He panted for breath as he tried to keep himself under control, but touching Rose was so intoxicating. How could he ever stop?

It seemed that for Rose, touching him was also intoxicating. It was as though she was trying to press every inch of their bodies together. Not that James was complaining.

Rose moved her hands to his hair and tugged it to guide his lips back to hers in a much-desired kiss as she rocked her hips tentatively against his.

He moaned lowly as she rubbed against his erection. His hands spastically moved around her bare torso, touching every inch of skin that had been previously hidden from him. She was so soft and warm, and her skin was so smooth, and this all felt so bloody good!

He arched his hips up into hers, whimpering when his arousal pulsed sharply, warningly, but James wasn’t quite aware of the signals his body was sending him, ignoring them in favor of pulling Rose tight against him. He nibbled his way down her jaw, panting in pleasure at the feel of her breasts pressed to his chest, at his nipples being teased by her skin, and probably vice versa, if her mewling whimpers were anything to go by.

He sucked at the spot on her neck that always made her shiver and moan. She sighed and tilted her head to encourage him to continue.

She wound her fingers through his hair and scraped his scalp and rocked down on his hips in such a way that made James’s vision white out. He groaned deep in his throat and he could barely get out a warning before a hot rush of pleasure surged up his spine and he throbbed his release into his pants.

“Shit,” he whimpered, clenching his eyes shut against the pleasure and mortification as he buried his face in her neck.

Christ, this felt amazing! He couldn’t decide if he should let his embarrassment or his pleasure win, and so he just moaned into her neck as hot waves of pleasure continued sparking through his veins. His ears rang with the intensity of his orgasm and he felt blinded to everything except Rose, and how bloody good it felt to have her in his lap with her hands in his hair and her skin touching his as her hips continued to move against his so brilliantly.

He panted as reality slowly started to return to him, and he finally let the mortification have its due turn.

“Sorry,” he whispered, vaguely aware that Rose was running her fingers through his hair in a way that made him feel sated and drowsy. “Shit, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Rose murmured, leaning down and pressing a gentle kiss to his temple.

“I didn’t mean to…”

“James, it’s fine,” Rose assured him, tilting his head up to look him in the eye. His cheeks were flushed pink and his eyes had a hazy look of pleasure in them that tugged something deep in her belly. He looked so beautiful right now. “That was really hot.”

“Yeah?” he asked nervously.
Rose nodded and pressed a long but chaste kiss to his lips.

“Was that okay for you?” she asked, resting her forehead against his.

*Was that okay? That was fan-bloody-tastic!*

“Of course,” he said, skating his fingertips up and down her ribs. “Ehm… I didn’t make you uncomfortable, did I?”

“Nope,” she promised. “Like I said, that was really sexy.”

James hummed happily and murmured, “Good. I, ehm, maybe we could do this again, then? Well, perhaps not in my pants. But, ehm, if you want, I’m-I think I’m ready for us to, ehm, keep moving forward? Maybe not tonight, but y’know, soon?”

Rose smiled reassuringly at James; he sounded so nervous.

“Yeah, I’m ready too,” she whispered.

“You are?” he asked, tilting his head up to look at her. She nodded. “Brilliant!”

Rose giggled and pressed a quick kiss to his mouth as she scrambled off his lap. She glanced down at his trousers and saw a rather prominent wet mark near his zipper.

James noticed it too.

“I’ll-I’ll be right back,” he mumbled, his cheeks reddening once more as he grabbed his pajamas and rushed to the loo.

She felt warm with lust and pride that she had made James come in his pants, and she felt an ache deep inside her with the desire to pleasure him again and have him pleasure her in turn. For the first time, she felt truly ready to make love with her soulmate.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Wherein they all go to San Francisco to help pack, and James and Rose explore their physical relationship further.

Chapter Notes

Note: This chapter earns the explicit rating. There are two nsfw scenes in this chapter, one at the beginning and one at the end.

“Rose, love,” James murmured, pressing his lips to Rose’s forehead. He reached over and stroked his fingers down her cheek, trying to ease her awake.

She wrinkled her nose as she wrapped her arm around his waist and nuzzled closer to him. James smiled softly at her, but redoubled his efforts to wake her. His dad had already parked and was working on carrying their suitcases inside.

He jiggled his shoulder, making her head jostle. She blinked open an eye and muttered, “Pillows aren’t supposed to move.”

“Then perhaps next time you’ll use a real pillow,” he teased, unbuckling his seatbelt as soon as she scooted away from it. “We’re here.”

Rose’s eyes brightened as she glanced through the front windshield and at the house.

He took her hand and guided her into the house. Rose looked around in wonder at the light colors and the natural light coming from all of the windows.

“Oh, it’s beautiful!” she breathed.

James gave her a brief tour of the house, but saw she still looked a bit knackered. Truthfully, so was he.

“C’mon, we can go to bed now, if you want?” he suggested, gesturing to the stairs.

Rose nodded in agreement, despite it barely being suppertime. She wasn’t overly sleepy, per se, but she felt drained from all the traveling.

“Oh, you finally get to see my masterpiece of a bedroom!” James exclaimed excitedly when they walked up the stairs.

Rose saw entrance to Moria painted around James’s door, and she ran up to the door and flung it open.

“Oh!”
Rose gasped as she stepped into the Tolkien-themed room. She made a circuit around the room, admiring the walls and the furniture and the decorations.

She turned back around to James and grinned in delight.

“Oh, this is beautiful!” Rose gushed, skipping up to him and draping her arms around his neck. “Absolutely gorgeous!”

“You’ll have to tell Dad,” James murmured, dropping his hands to Rose’s waist. “Tomorrow though. For now, bed.”

“To sleep?” Rose asked innocently, scraping her nails lightly through the short hairs on the back of his neck.

He leaned closer to her until his nose hovered just a hairsbreadth from hers. She felt his breath puff against her lips as he said, “Well, I suppose eventually. But it has been over twenty-four hours since I’ve snogged you, and that is unacceptable.”

Rose grinned and tightened her grip around the back of his neck to guide them into a kiss. She loved how much more confident James was getting with their physical relationship. He wasn’t nervous to initiate a snog, and he no longer tried to hide the fact that he was aroused by her. His growing confidence fueled her own, and she found they were creating a positive feedback loop as they dabbled deeper in their intimacy.

She opened her mouth for him, groaning as his tongue slid against hers while his hands dropped to her bum to hold her close.

“Bed,” she mumbled the moment she had a chance.

James growled low in his chest and he walked them backwards.

“Shirt off?” he asked, trailing his fingers up and down the buttons of her blouse.

“As long as yours comes off too.”

They worked together on shedding their shirts, mostly disrobing themselves to more quickly be able to feel skin on skin.

“Trousers too?” Rose asked, popping the button on her jeans. Snogging in just their pants was a more recent development; they’d only tried it once, but it had felt so bloody good, and Rose was eager to do it again.

“Oh, yes,” James groaned. His eyes were glued to her breasts and the way they jiggled and bounced as she worked on tugging her jeans down her thighs.

“Oi, less looking, more nakedness,” Rose teased when she was standing only in her knickers while he still had on his shoes and jeans.

James blinked rapidly at her before he clumsily toed off his shoes and yanked his trousers down his legs. He hopped on one foot as his jeans got caught around his ankles, but he eventually successfully tossed the denim to the floor.

“You’re so beautiful, Rose,” he whispered as he stepped up to her.

Rose shivered at the feel of so much of his skin touching hers, and she pressed closer to him.
“So are you,” she murmured, letting her hands wander across his chest and back, delighting in the flex of his muscles beneath her fingers. He was deceptively strong; as skinny as he was, he still sported quite a bit of lean muscle.

James hummed happily in his throat, and Rose chased the sound by pressing her lips to his. He was already hard against her hip, and she felt the twitching of his hips as he tried not to thrust against her.

She sucked his bottom lip into her mouth and twined her fingers through his hair as she rocked her hips against his, giving him the friction he wanted but was denying himself.

“Oh, blimey, Rose,” he gasped, resting his forehead against hers.

“Bed?” she asked, pushing lightly at his chest.

He sat down heavily on the mattress and scooted to the headboard before he opened his arms for her. She crawled up into his lap and straddled his thighs, sighing when her bare breasts were teased by his chest hair. God, she loved doing this with him, and she wondered if perhaps tonight they might be able to take another step forward. She still hadn’t touched or been touched by James in the way she truly wanted.

She reclaimed his bottom lip and gave it a quick nibble, delighting in his shiver of pleasure. She rocked her hips a bit faster against his, breathing heavily through her nose as his erection rubbed against her through her knickers. It felt so bloody good, and if the sighs and moans James was making were any indication, he was enjoying this as much as she was. She felt a deep, aching need and her body seemed to work beyond her control as she pressed down harder on him, following the instincts of the hot surge of pleasure in her gut.

James groaned deep in his chest before he gasped, “Shit, Rose, stop!”

Rose recognized his frantic tone that meant he was either about to come in his pants—as was the norm, lately—or flee from the room to take care of it himself.

She dutifully sat back on his thighs, glancing down to the hard bulge of him in his boxers. There was a small wet patch at the front, and something deep in Rose clenched tight in desire.

“Erm, can we stop now?” he asked, his voice a bit strained as he clenched his hands into fists.

Rose bit her lip and said, “Of course we can. But if you want—if you’re okay with it—could I maybe, erm, y’know, take care of it for you? Instead of you? If that’s all right?”

James was silent for so long that Rose was about to crawl out of his lap and hide under their bed. But then James’s thumbs rubbed at her hips and he managed to squeak out, “You want to?”

She nodded shyly, and noticed how hungrily he was staring at her.

“Can I?” she asked, a little more confidently as she drummed her fingers up and down his ribs before tracing a light line around the waistband of his pants, just above where he was tenting them.

He nodded and swallowed dryly before he said, “Budge up a second?”

Rose pressed a parting kiss to his lips before she scrambled off his lap to recline beside him on their bed.

James’s hands shook as he slowly inched his pants down his hips and over his erection, before he kicked his boxers to the floor.
Rose looked down at his newly-revealed erection. It jutted out from a thick thatch of dark, curly hairs, and was long and hard and arched subtly towards his stomach. The tip of him was dark red and shiny from the moisture he was leaking, and it twitched and throbbed of its own accord.

But that wasn’t the only thing that had caught her attention. James was naked. Her soulmate was naked! And he was so beautiful! She’d seen most of him before, but for him to feel utterly safe with her to be naked with her made her heart pulse with so much warmth and love for him.

“Ehm… okay?” he asked in a small voice, and Rose realized she’d been staring for longer than was appropriate.

“You’re perfect,” she assured, pressing a gentle kiss to his lips. “Can I touch—?”

He nodded, and reclined back on the pillows. Rose cuddled up to his side and felt how tense his muscles were.

“If this is making you uncomfortable, we can stop,” Rose reminded, rubbing her hand across his chest in the hopes of easing his nerves.

“No, no, I’m fine,” he croaked out. “We can keep going. If you want to?”

Rose wrapped her arm around his shoulders as she let the hand that was stroking his chest slowly descend into uncharted territory. She scraped her fingers through the fine hairs on his belly and heard his breath hitch when her hand was just inches from his erection.

She reached out and stroked a finger from the base of him to the tip. James exhaled raggedly and his hips bucked up sharply.

Rose wrapped her fingers loosely around him and gave him a tentative stroke. He whimpered and squeezed his eyes shut as Rose explored him. He felt so hot in her hand, and was paradoxically hard and soft; the skin was smooth and soft but also firm and solid in her hand. It was unlike anything she’d felt before.

She gave him another tentative stroke, and rubbed her thumb across the tip of his cock and through the clear fluid accumulating there. He gasped and bucked up again.

“Rose,” he moaned.

“Tell me what you want,” she whispered, wanting him to teach her how to pleasure him.

“Faster,” he begged. “God, this feels so good.”

Rose complied, and started stroking him quicker, but still with a loose fist. James reached down and covered her hand, tightening her grip around him, and helped her position her hand so that on the upstroke, she gave him a little twist that rubbed the underside of his cock.

“J-just like—fuck—like this,” he moaned, thrusting lightly into their hands.

Rose pressed her lips to his temples as she continued stroking him as he’d shown her. He was trembling in her arms and making the sexiest noises as he panted for breath.

“You’re so beautiful, James,” she whispered, her heart aching with love for him as her stomach swooped deliciously.

He was leaking steadily over her fingers, and he felt even harder than he did before, and hotter, and
Rose’s core ached when she realized he was close.

“Gonna come,” he whimpered, the muscles of his thighs quivering as he writhed on the bed.

He was panting raggedly as Rose unthinkingly increased the speed of her hand, wanting to see him break apart. She swiped her thumb across the tip of him, gathering the moisture he was leaking and spreading it down his length.

“Rose, oh, Rose, fuck!”

He started moaning rhythmically from deep in his chest as his cock flushed crimson and he throbbed heavily in her hand. He sucked in a sharp breath and held it as he came, spurting messily over his belly as he released his held breath on a low and shaky moan.

His face pinched in pleasure as his head arched back into the pillows. She watched as he clenched his teeth and flared his nostrils and furrowed his brow as he pulsed in her hand.

“Oh, Rose,” he whimpered, turning his head to bury his face into her neck as his cock stopped pumping his release.

She continued to gently stroke his cock until he sighed heavily and tapped at her wrist to tell her to let go of him. She did, and watched him twitch lightly on his stomach as he started to go limp.

“Bloody hell,” he panted, blindly reaching over for the tissues on his bedside table.

He grabbed a handful and wiped the mess off his belly and gave his cock a quick swipe before tossing them in the general direction of the trash can. He then turned towards her and nuzzled his cheek into her breasts and he wrapped his arms around her.

“That was bloody brilliant,” he murmured, sounding adorably sleepy. “Thank you.”

Rose hummed in response and held him close as he snuggled her. She ran her fingers through his hair, delighting in his contented hum and the way he leaned into her touch.

“What about you?” he mumbled, tilting his head to blink blearily up at her. He trailed his fingers down her ribs until he could trace the elastic waistband of her knickers. “D’you want me to…?”

Rose shook her head as she took his hand in hers and lifted his hand to her lips to press a kiss to it. The needy throbbing in her core had mostly dissipated, and she was starting to feel the exhaustion from their travelling catch up to her.

“You sure?” he asked, lifting himself up on his elbow to look at her. He looked nervous all of a sudden. “I don’t want you to think I… I want you to be enjoying this too.”

“I am,” she assured, stroking her fingers through his hair. “I promise. What we just did was really hot and I loved doing that to you.”

“I want to do that for you, too,” James argued.

“You can,” Rose said, pressing a quick kiss to his mouth. “But not tonight. I’m knackered.”

James grumbled under his breath, but nodded and reluctantly removed his head from Rose’s rather marvelous breasts so they could get ready for bed.

oOoOo
James woke up slowly the next morning, feeling warm and drowsy and sated as the memories of the previous night came back to him. God, it had felt so bloody good to come with Rose’s hand on his cock rather than his own. He really wished she’d let him reciprocate; he wanted to pleasure her as thoroughly as she’d pleasured him. He was so ready to make love with his soulmate.

His soulmate who was missing, at the moment.

“Rose?” he mumbled, rubbing his hands into his eyes as he tried to blink away the grittiness.

“Right here.”

He looked at the door and watched her walk in. She looked off; her jaw was clenched and she was slightly hunched and she was walking gingerly.

“Rose, love,” he said, immediately awakening completely. “You all right?”

“Mhm,” she said, slowly crawling into bed beside him. She exhaled heavily as she lay on her back and pulled her knees up.

“Don’t lie to me, Rose,” he ground out, pressing the backs of his fingers to her forehead. She didn’t feel hot or clammy or anything, but there was something definitely wrong with her.

“It’s nothing, really,” she mumbled, swatting his hands away as a blush stained her cheeks.

“Dammit, Rose!” Irritation was warring with his concern; he couldn’t help her if he didn’t know what was bloody wrong with her!

She sighed and rubbed her hands over her face as she mumbled, “’M on my period.”

James blinked down at her for a moment, then exhaled in relief and said, “Blimey, why didn’t you say so?”

“’S embarrassing.”

“No, it’s not,” he said gently. “It’s a natural process, Rose. One you’ve been going through for years, love.”

James paused suddenly, and his brow furrowed and his mouth moved as he spoke to himself.

“And you would’ve already gone through one cycle with me already,” he realized. “Blimey. Didn’t notice that one.”

“They usually aren’t bad,” Rose explained, gingerly rolling onto her side to face him. “I was on my period a week or two after your mum’s funeral. It wasn’t a bad one. But every few months, I get like this. Crampy and nauseous. I’m so sorry, but I’m going to be a bit useless today. Possibly tomorrow, too.”

“Don’t apologize. You can just sit on the sofa and watch me pack up boxes.”

He winked theatrically at her, and grinned when it made her giggle. His smile faded though when he saw her eyebrows pinch into a grimace as she rolled onto her side and hugged her knees to her chest.

“What can I do to help?” he asked, stroking her hair away from her face.

“Nothing,” Rose mumbled. “It’ll clear up in a couple days.”
“I’m sorry,” he whispered, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

He rested his head on her pillow and rubbed his nose against hers as he played with her hair.

“Changed my mind,” she murmured, her voice sounding thick and groggy. “You can keep doing that for the next few days.”

James breathed out a laugh and said, “As my lady wishes.”

They stayed in bed until they could hear banging coming from downstairs and the smell of coffee permeated through the air.

“Suppose we should get up.”

“You can stay in bed, if you want,” James offered, pressing a parting kiss to her cheek before rolling away from her.

“Nah, I’ll be okay,” she said. “Gotta supervise you packing away boxes, don’t I?”

James rolled his eyes at her before he gathered his clothes and headed for the shower.

He waited until Rose had showered and dressed before they both headed downstairs for breakfast. His dad had just finished making waffles, and James eagerly bit into one as he poured himself a cup of coffee and started the kettle for tea for Rose.

“Bit hungry, are you?” Robert asked dryly, watching as James tried to shove half a waffle into his mouth.

James shrugged and continued chewing. He was starved; he hadn’t eaten anything substantial in over twelve hours.

Rose shook her head fondly at him as she loaded up her own plate with a waffle and eggs. She sat down gingerly at the table and bit her lip as a band of cramping pressure squeezed around her abdomen.

“All right, Rose?” Robert asked gently.

“Fine,” she said with a half-smile.

Robert pursed his lips and stared at her for a moment, but didn’t say anything else.

“Here you are, love,” James said, walking over to the table while balancing two mugs and a plate in his hands.

He set her tea in front of her and scooted his chair closer to her as he devoured his second waffle.

They ate together in a comfortable silence, and Rose listened to James and Robert go through the agenda for their stay in San Francisco.

“Aren’t you going to eat that?” James asked quietly when he realized she was merely pushing the remnants of her breakfast around her plate.

“Not all that hungry,” she admitted. She stacked her plate on top of James’s empty plate and pushed up from the table.

He watched her walk out of the kitchen and down the hall where the loo was, and he sighed. He
desperately wanted to make her feel better, but short of taking out her uterus, there wasn’t much to be done. He sighed again and finished off her breakfast before loading the dishwasher.

“Hey, James, mate,” Robert said when James was about to walk out of the kitchen.

“Yeah?”

“I don’t mean to intrude or make Rose uncomfortable,” he began delicately, “but if she needs it, there is a heating pad and some muscle relaxants in our— my bedroom.”

James furrowed his brow at his dad, until he suddenly realized what his dad was hinting at.

“How could you tell?” James demanded. Even he hadn’t realized what was wrong with Rose until she told him. The fact that his dad had picked up on it before he did made him feel like the most rubbish soulmate in existence.

“James, mate, I was with your mum for over thirty years,” Robert said softly. “I learned quickly how to recognize when your mum was on her monthly. You’ll get there too, eventually. But as I said, the heating pad and pills might help keep her comfortable.”

“Thanks,” James mumbled, turning around and walking to is dad’s room.

He rooted around in the en suite for a few minutes before he found the supplies for Rose, and he quickly joined her in the living room. His heart broke for her when he saw her curled in a ball and hugging her belly as the news played in the background.

“Here, love,” he whispered, leaning over her to plug the heating pad into the outlet behind the sofa. “This might help a bit. And I’ve got some muscle relaxants for you.”

“Oh, you’re a life saver,” Rose moaned, placing the warming pad on her lower abdomen.

“Is there anything else I can do for you?” he asked anxiously as he handed her a bottle of water and the pills.

Rose swallowed them down and shook her head.

“I’ll be fine in a few days,” she assured.

James sighed and nodded forlornly. He hated seeing her in pain.

“Let me know if I can get you anything else,” he said. “I’m going to find Dad and see what he wants me to do.”

“I feel badly that I came along to help and I’m just sitting here uselessly,” Rose protested.

“Don’t worry about it, love,” he said, kissing her forehead. “I want you to sit here and feel better. All right?”

He turned away from Rose and poked his head in a few rooms until he found his dad in the master bedroom.

“Could you help me go through your mum’s clothes?” Robert asked, staring wearily at his wife’s dresser as the door to their closet stood open beside it.

“Of course,” James said. “I can handle this if you’d rather box something else up.”
“Thanks, mate, but I’ll be fine.”

They worked in silence as Robert cleaned out the drawer containing Vera’s knickers and bras while James went through the closet and put everything in a bag to be sent to donation centers.

It was slow going, made even slower whenever they found various knickknacks or photos Vera had stashed away in the bedroom.

James found a romance novel in his mum’s nightstand, and the photograph she was using as a bookmark fluttered out. It was a photo of the three of them, taken shortly after James had moved back into the house to await his trip to London. They’d gone to Napa Valley and explored the winery together.

James looked down at their smiling faces. His mum was in the middle, and had one arm wrapped around his dad, and the other wrapped around him. She was leaning against his dad, who had his chin on top of her head, and James had a wine glass held out in front of him in a toast. They all looked so happy and carefree, and James would give anything to go back to that.

“C’mere, mate.”

James barely realized he’d begun to cry, but at his dad’s soft words and hand on his shoulder, the dam burst. He leaned into his dad’s waiting embrace and ground his teeth together as he tried to pull himself together.

“Your mother loved you so much, James,” Robert whispered as he held James in a tight hug.

James clung to his dad and breathed raggedly.

“I loved her, too,” he gasped. “I miss her so much, Dad.”

“I know. So do I.” Robert’s breathing hitched, and he held James tighter. “So do I.”

James pulled away after a few moments and scrubbed his hands across his face.

“We’re just about finished in here, yeah?” he asked. He glanced around at the empty closet and wardrobe that seemed to echo the emptiness in his heart that had never gone away since the day of the accident. His dad nodded, and James said, “I’m gonna check on Rose.”

He stood up and took in a deep breath before he walked back out to the living room.

Rose, meanwhile, had tucked herself into the sofa with a blanket and a book as she tried to sit as still as possible to keep from aggravating her uterus any further.

James had been with his dad for over an hour when she finally heard him walking down the hall. She glanced up at him, and balked when she saw his red eyes and mussed hair.

She sat up and dropped her legs to the floor to make room for him on the couch beside her.

“James, love…”

He shook his head but sat beside her on the sofa and immediately cuddled next to her.

Rose’s heart broke as she held him close and pressed kisses to the top of his head.

“I love you,” she whispered.
James nuzzled closer and murmured, “I didn’t expect it to be this hard. Going through my mum’s things.”

“I know, love. I’m so sorry.”

James sat with her in silence for a few moments, taking comfort in her warmth and her scent. “How are you feeling?” he finally asked when he felt like he had a better grip on his emotions. “Been better,” she admitted. “Been worse, though.” “I’m sorry,” he murmured sympathetically. “It’s all right,” Rose shrugged. “I’ll be ready to go in a few days’ time.”

Rose was back to helping load boxes by Wednesday, and come the weekend, they’d gotten so much accomplished that Robert insisted she and James go out sight-seeing. She’d tried to protest, but as James tugged her towards the waiting taxi, Robert assured her that he could handle packing up their offices at the university alone.

The climb up the Coit Tower was rough, but James insisted she get a birds-eye view of the city before they go anywhere else. And when she saw the Golden Gate Bridge gleaming in the sun with the rest of San Francisco as a backdrop, she grudgingly agreed it had been worth those 400 steps. Rose looked out over the teeming city looming out just over the bay, and was struck by a sense of awe and wonder. “Selfie time?” James asked, tugging on her shoulder to get her to spin around. He held his phone out in front of them and held her close as he took a photograph of them with the Golden Gate Bridge peeking out behind them. “Perfect!” he proclaimed when he saw it. “Now, shall we see the bridge up close?” Rose nodded eagerly, and they hailed another cab to the bridge. “Blimey, is this a subtle hint from you that I ought to exercise more?” Rose teased when she saw how long the bridge was. “No!” he exclaimed quickly. “I just—” He trailed off when he caught sight of her playful grin. “You know I think you’re beautiful,” he said, bumping his hip against hers. “Come on, Rose Tyler!” They walked leisurely across the bridge, admiring the view of the bay and how the late morning sun glittered off the still waters. By the time they reached the end of the bridge and the little town it opened up to, they were both ready for lunch. After their meal, they decided to explore the redwood forest of a nearby park. Rose’s enthusiasm for the enormous trees was infectious, and they found themselves chasing each other through the trees and other tourists. James skittered by an elderly couple and caught up to Rose and swung her up into his arms. “Gotcha!” he growled before pressing a sloppy, enthusiastic kiss to her cheek as she shrieked with laughter.
The rest of their weekend was spent touring as many of the San Francisco sites as they could. They wandered through museums and monuments and little shops. On the ferry-ride to Alcatraz Island, it had started to drizzle on them, but they refused to let that ruin their fun. Rather than grumble and whine like some of the other passengers, James and Rose stood at the edge of the ferry and watched the waves lap up the sides of the boat as the rain dampened their hair and clothes.

“I’ve loved our weekend,” Rose told James as she took his hand halfway through their tour of the old prison. “I love doing stuff like this with you.”

James beamed widely and giggled low in his throat. “Me too.”

When they arrived home late Sunday night, they were thoroughly exhausted yet still giddy from their weekend adventure.

“Race you upstairs,” James challenged when he locked the front door behind him.

They giggled louder than was appropriate as they ran up to James’s room.

“I win!” Rose crowed as she yanked open his bedroom door and stepped into Middle Earth.

She looked so beautiful standing in the middle of his room with pink cheeks and bright eyes and frizzy hair. He kicked the door shut behind him and stepped up to Rose until he could feel her body heat mingling with his own.

“Thanks for today,” he murmured, resting his hands on her hips.

“I should be thanking you,” Rose argued. “That was so much fun.”

“Yeah, it was. It was the most fun I’d had in a while, and it’s so much more fun with you beside me.” He dipped down to press soft kisses to her lips. “So thank you.”

Rose returned his kisses with firmer pressure, urging him for more. When he parted his lips for her, she snuck her tongue into his mouth and traced it across the ridges on the roof of his mouth.

He sighed in pleasure as he snuck his hands up her shirt to palm her breasts. She groaned and rubbed her hips against his, coaxing his cock to life.

It was almost second nature by now how they moved in synchronous motion to remove their shirts. James was so happy that Rose was so comfortable with snogging him, and letting him see her in almost complete nakedness. He wondered if perhaps tonight they could jump over one more hurdle, and maybe he could finally see her completely naked. He muffled a groan into her bare neck as his cock fervently agreed with that desire.

“Trousers off?” he asked, dipping his fingertips below the waistband of her jeans to knead at her bum.

Rose nodded as she removed her hands from his hair to fumble with the button and zipper of his jeans.

They were soon left in only their pants, and they broke apart to recline on the bed. James tugged her into his lap and lazily thrust up against her as his hands wandered across her skin.

Rose’s fingers trailed down his belly before she covered his clothed cock with her hand and palmed him through his pants. He moaned and arched into her touch, and whimpered in desire when she slipped her fingers through the front slit of his boxers to tease his erection. While he very much
wanted her to continue, he wanted something else a bit more.

“Wait,” he whispered, regretfully tugging her hand out of his pants. “I want… if it’s all right… can I touch you?”

He rubbed his fingers over the soft skin of her belly and just barely let his fingertips dip under the fabric of her knickers.

“Yeah,” she said, her voice trembling slightly.

“You sure?” he asked, trying to catch her eye to make sure she actually wanted this.

She bit her lip and nodded, but then she lifted herself out of his lap. He watched her go in confusion, and he nearly choked on his tongue when he realized she was taking off her knickers. James’s mouth was dry as he watched her tug the tiny scrap of fabric down her legs, leaving her completely bare before him.

“You’re so gorgeous,” he rasped, letting his eyes linger on the dark thatch of glistening curls between her legs. “God, you’re gorgeous!”

Rose smiled shyly at him, before she bit down on her lip.

“How should we…?”

James sat up straighter and positioned more pillows behind his back before he urged her into his lap again. She delicately straddled his thighs, and James groaned when he felt the heat of her throbbing through the fabric of his pants.

“Let me know if you ever want me to stop,” he told her before he let his fingertips graze through her coarse hairs.

Her breath hitched when his middle finger teased across her sopping slit.

“Okay?” he asked, glancing up at her.

“Yeah,” she said, rocking tentatively into his hand.

He smiled reassuringly at her and pressed a series of gentle kisses across her neck as he let a finger slip through her. God, she was so wet! James’s cock throbbed in desire, and he palmed himself through his pants as his fingers continued to explore.

His middle finger touched against something raised and swollen, and Rose gasped in pleasure and bucked her hips against his hand.

He experimentally rubbed his finger against it again, and Rose made that same noise.

“Shit, James!” Rose moaned. Her hands clenched tightly around his shoulders and her eyes were squeezed tightly shut as she panted harshly.

“Still okay?” he asked.

“Intense,” she gritted out.

He slowed his hand, and she said, “Didn’t mean stop.”

He chuckled and returned his ministrations, but he instead focused his attentions on the sides of her
clit in hopes that it wouldn’t be as overwhelming. Her breathing became less erratic and her harsh pants softened into low moans as his fingers experimentally brushed and stroked against various parts of her to find out what she liked best.

“Ehm, can-can I… inside you…?”

Rose tensed above him, but nodded slowly.

“You sure?” he asked, still rubbing lightly at her clit. “I don’t have to.”

“Can we try it?” she asked, her cheeks pink in a combination of arousal and nervousness.

“Of course, love,” he murmured, palming her breast with one hand as he let the fingers of his other hand dip lower and deeper to where she was radiating moist heat. “Ready?”

She nodded and sucked in a breath as she felt him insert a finger.

James groaned into her neck as her quivering muscles clamped around his middle finger. He slowly rotated his finger, stretching her gently, and waited for her to give him the go-ahead to continue. When she started rocking against his hand, he carefully thrust his finger in and out of her, shuddering in arousal at the wet squelching noise.

“Is this good?” he asked, hoping she was enjoying this.

“Mhm,” she moaned, nodding as she curled her fingers around his shoulders. “Feels so good, James. *Fuck!*”

He breathed out a sigh of relief and began to press long, suckling kisses to her neck and chest, delighting in the goosebumps of pleasure that broke out over her skin.

James experimentally curled his finger inside of her, and his fingertip pressed into a spongey-feeling patch of muscle. Rose cried out and tightened her grip on his shoulders.

“Fuck, do that again,” she begged breathlessly.

He did, and she keened once more. Her muscles were throbbing around his finger. She must be close.

He doubled his efforts, despite his wrist beginning to cramp, and eventually remembered her reaction to having her clit played with. His hand left her breast to join its mate, and he started rubbing light circles onto her swollen clit.

“Oh, fuck,” Rose whimpered, panting through gritted teeth as her thighs started trembling. “James, I… something’s… I need…”

“Let it happen, Rose,” he murmured, thrusting and curling his finger into her faster as he put a more direct touch on her clit, wanting to see her tip over in pleasure. “You look so gorgeous like this. You’re so beautiful. Come for me, Rose.”

Rose sucked in a sharp breath as her muscles squeezed his finger tighter and tighter, before they contracted powerfully. Rose cried out in time with the rhythmic pulsing as his hands were drenched in a rush of fluid. She arched her back as her hips jolted forward clumsily, thrusting against his hand.

Heat boiled in James’s belly, and he angled his forearm down to rub against his cock. He stifled his own grunt of pleasure into her neck as spurted his release into his pants. He panted into her neck and
tried to focus on working her down from her orgasm as gently as he could. When the pulsing of her muscles finally stopped, James pressed his lips to her temple and carefully slipped his finger out of her. She grunted softly as she was suddenly empty, but then nuzzled closer to him.

James’s hand was glistening with moisture, and as much as he ached to know what she tasted like, he wasn’t sure if that would make her uncomfortable or not, so he casually wiped his fingers off on his discarded vest and brought his arms up to wrap around Rose’s waist.

“Good?” he asked, a feeling of pride washing through him at the knowledge that he had just given Rose her first orgasm.

“Very,” she murmured lethargically. “What about you? Do you want me to…?”

Her hand dropped to the front of his pants, but when she was met with no resistance, she glanced down at him.

“Ehm, sorry, love,” he said, his ears burning. “Got a wee bit excited.”

Rose giggled into his chest and pressed a sloppy kiss to his jaw.

“I love you,” she murmured, feeling sleepy and sated.

“Love you, too, Rose.”
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Wherein James and Rose move into their flat, and they finally consummate their relationship.

Chapter Notes

Chapter rating: Explicit

“So, I was thinking,” James murmured, slipping his hand under Rose’s (well, *his*, he thought happily) t-shirt to trace circles across her belly. He never knew seeing her in his shirt would be so sexy.

Rose hummed and turned her neck so she could look up at him. “S’always a dangerous thing for you.”

James mock-frowned and lightly pinched her. Rose swatted his hand, then rolled onto her back to look at him without straining her neck. She bunched her pillows around her head and gave him her attention.

“We can move into our flat in ten days,” James said.

Rose nodded. They had been in San Francisco for nearly two weeks, making arrangements to sell the furniture and appliances Robert didn’t want to take home to Scotland, which had been almost everything.

They had arrived back in Scotland a few days ago, and now it was time for them to begin planning their own move.

“And I was thinking, maybe we could stay with your mum for a few days before we get our keys?” James suggested, replacing his hand on her stomach. He loved feeling her skin against his, and not even their seven beautiful weeks together had been enough to quench that desire. “If it’s all right with her, of course. I just thought it might make it easier for us to go shopping for furniture for the flat. What do you think?”

Rose caught his hand in hers and gave his fingers a squeeze.

“Sounds good,” she said, shoving aside her anxieties about them needing to go out and buy all the furnishings for their flat. When James was moving out of his Boston apartment, they’d come to the agreement that he would sell his old furniture and they would use the cash to buy whatever they wanted in their new flat. And while Rose had been excited at first that they would get to decorate and furnish a flat together, she was now getting nervous about spending his money. Furniture was *expensive!* “I’ll call Mum, but I’m sure she won’t mind. She loves you, y’know. And it’ll be nice to spend a bit of time with her.”
James cringed as his cheeks heated up. Rose never complained once, but the reminder that he’d relied on her so heavily to stay sane these last seven weeks filled him with embarrassment.

“We can shop for plane or train tickets today, then,” Rose said, oblivious to his self-consciousness. “Once I get the go-ahead from Mum.”

“Ehm, actually, we may want to have a car with us in Oxford. I was going to take my car, so, ehm, we’ll have to drive ourselves.”

And this was how, with five days to go until they could move into their flat, James and Rose packed up his beat-up blue sedan with all of the clothes and trinkets they had in Scotland and headed down the M6 to London.

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“Ooh, how about these?” James asked, walking up to a pair of tall and sturdy chifforobes. He ran his fingers across the sleek, dark wood, pleased that they were virtually identical. No need to worry about matching the bedroom furniture when it came pre-matched!

“Sure,” Rose said, stuffing her hands into her back pockets as she surreptitiously peeked at the price tag.

“Roooose,” James whined. “I want your help with this! You’ve said ‘sure’ to the last five dressers we’ve looked at!”

Rose shrugged and said, “If you like them, get them.”

“I want you to like them too,” James argued, trying to keep the frustration out of his voice. Rose didn’t seem to be at all interested in shopping together. “This is our flat. We’re decorating it together.”

Rose shrugged and continued meandering along the aisles of the second-hand furniture store they were in. James sighed, and stared longingly at the chifforobes before he followed Rose, wondering if she had her eye on something else.

The longer they spent in the shop, James realized she didn’t. Nor did she have an opinion on any of the other pieces of furniture James suggested to her.

“Look, Rose, if you don’t like anything here, we can try somewhere else,” James said impatiently when she’d nonchalantly hummed at the dining room table and chairs he’d pointed out.

“Everything you’ve stopped to look at has been lovely,” she said stiffly. “Just pick something. Which ones did you like best?”

“God, Rose, why are you being so stubborn?” he asked, raking his hands through his hair. “I want your opinion! We’re supposed to be doing this together. Why are you acting like you don’t care?”

“Because it’s your money!” she finally snapped. Her cheeks pinkened and she turned away from him to rub her thumbnail through the grain of wood of the table.

“Oh,” he breathed, and she felt him rest a hand on her shoulder. “Rose, love, look at me.”

Rose sighed and her shoulders slumped.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled, turning around to face him.
“You don’t have to apologize for anything,” James whispered, picking up her hand before she left a scratch in the wood. “I should’ve realized…”

“I’m trying, I am!” she said, hating how self-conscious she was, and hating that doing something as simple as shopping with her soulmate made her uncomfortable. “But for eighteen years, I’ve been told to always watch my money. And to not let people pay for me. Or that Mum got the final word on what we spent any money on. It’s just…”

“I get it,” James murmured. “But please, love. I want this flat to be ours. Yours and mine. I want you to love it too. I want it to feel like home for you. Besides, if you make me pick our furniture, there’s almost a one-hundred percent certainty that you’ll dislike how it all matches. It would be a waste of money for us to buy furniture you don’t like the look of and probably won’t use.”

Rose sighed; he did have a bit of a point. James, bless him, just didn’t have an eye for decorating. And she knew she needed to let go of her issues with money, but it was so hard…

“I really liked those chifforobes we looked at earlier,” she muttered to the floor, trying to not remember the price tags and what the grand total of this shopping trip would cost James. No, cost them.

“Me too,” James whispered. He moved his hands up to her jaw and stroked the apples of her cheeks softly. “I know that it isn’t easy to let go of life-long habits. And I’m sorry I got short with you. I should’ve realized. I’ll try to be more patient.”

Rose exhaled in relief, and she covered James’s hands with hers.

“I’m trying to be better,” she promised. “I really am trying.”

“I know, love.” He leaned down and pressed a chaste kiss to her forehead. “Now come on. Let’s go have a look at those dressers, eh? Then we can work on matching the rest of our flat from there?”

Rose nodded shyly, and took his hand in hers and guided him back to the front of the store to square away pieces of their bedroom furniture.

Over the next several days, they scoured nearly every shop in and around London to furnish their flat. Buying a bed and a couch were the most entertaining for them, as they flopped and bounced all over the furniture to make sure it felt comfortable no matter the position they were in. (“Oh, we’ll be trying many positions, will we?” James had asked with a filthy smirk that made Rose’s belly swoop deliciously.)

On the night before they were due to move into their flat, Rose snuggled up tight to James in the small double bed in her bedroom. Her mother, thankfully, decided they could be trusted to share a bed, after having caught them both sleeping together on the sofa every night throughout their stay during Rose’s orientation weekend.

“I’m really excited for this,” Rose whispered, running her fingertips up and down the bumpy ridges of his ribs.

“Oh, me too,” James answered. “I’ve been waiting my whole life for this. To share a home with you.”

Rose smiled into his shirt. So had she. When she was younger and her mother was still unaccepting of James, Rose would lay in her bed and try to imagine her future with James, a future where she would be able to escape her mother’s negativity and simply be with her soulmate forever. She was so glad Jackie had come around and she hadn’t had to choose between James and her mum.
“Love you,” she murmured, tugging the duvet up to her neck as her eyes grew heavy with sleep.

“Love you, too.”

They got off to an early start the next day. They were meeting their landlady at the property at 9am to get their keys, and it was a little over an hour’s drive from Jackie’s flat. James filled a travel mug of tea for Rose and himself before he ushered his drowsy soulmate to their car.

James adored how sleepy Rose was in the mornings, as though she couldn’t be coherent until she’d had her first cup of tea. He learned very quickly to not engage her in thoughtful conversation until she had time to fully wake up. So he settled into the driver’s seat and flicked on the radio before taking her hand to make the leisurely drive northwest.

Rose became more animated and talkative as they got nearer to their flat, and she was nearly bursting with excitement when they pulled up to the semi-detached house that was their new home.

“Oh, it’s beautiful!” Rose breathed when she saw it. She’d only seen it in photographs and online virtual tours, and it looked even cozier in person.

James grinned giddily at her as he parked the car in the narrow driveway off the side of the house. The landlady was already there, and the small old woman hobbled up to them.

It was quick business getting their keys, and James and Rose eagerly jogged up to their new home. James opened the door with a flourish, and let Rose inside first, but just as they were about to have their first look around at their new home, a moving truck pulled up along the street.

“Bet that’s for us!” James crowed. He pecked Rose on the forehead and said, “I’ll direct them inside, and you can have them arrange it however you want. I trust your eye better than mine.”

The truck contained their living room set, and Rose stood in the middle of the room as she mentally mapped out the best way to arrange their furniture to optimize functionality and aesthetic. After a few minutes, their couch, area rug, coffee table, and end table were all in place, and Rose love the way it all looked together against the gleaming hardwood floors.

“Dining set’s coming in!” James hollered from the front door.

Rose had them set the table in the space between the kitchen and the living room, right in front of the sliding glass doors that led to a patio area.

“What do you think, love?” James asked, and he leapt lightly onto one of the dining chairs before vaulting onto the high kitchen bar that acted as a barrier to their dining and living room space. His head bounced into one of the hanging lights, and he winced as he rubbed at his head and reached up to steady the swinging light. “We should get some chairs to put here, don’t you think?” His gaze wandered over her shoulder, and his face brightened as he, too, noticed the door to the patio. He jumped off the bar and rushed over to her to slide open the doors. “Oh, that’s beautiful! We should get patio furniture come spring! We could eat outside! Won’t that be brilliant?”

Rose laughed at his enthusiasm; he was worse than a toddler on a sugar rush, but she wouldn’t have him any other way. She walked up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist.

“I love our home,” she murmured into his back.

He giggled high in his throat, and spun around in her arms.

“So do I!” he proclaimed, and he leaned down to press his lips to hers in an enthusiastic kiss.
They were soon interrupted by a knock on the door, which revealed Jackie and Mickey, ready to help them unpack.

“I’ll start getting boxes from the car, love,” James said. “Why don’t you unpack the kitchen?”

Robert arrived mid-morning just as more furniture was delivered. Rose walked the delivery guys down the hall to where the first-floor bedroom was. She and James had agreed the spare bedroom would be their home office, and Rose immediately started working on making the room study-friendly. She had the movers set the couch against the wall overlooking the window, while the desk was shoved catty-corner to the window.

“It’s coming together nicely, darling,” Robert said, holding out a takeaway cup of tea and plate with a muffin on it for her.

Rose only now realized how hungry she’d gotten, having skipped breakfast in the excitement of moving.

“Thanks, Dad!”

Robert’s hand faltered, and the mug of outstretched tea nearly toppled to the floor before he got a grip on it. Rose was about to take it from him, and ask if he was all right, when she suddenly realized what she’d said.

She bit her lip and glanced up at him, trying to discern his expression. He looked utterly baffled, but he didn’t look angry. If anything, he looked… happy?

“Erm… I… Well…” She fumbled over her words before she twisted the ends of her hair around her fingers and asked, “Was that all right?”

Robert blinked rapidly for a moment, looking achingly like James when he was trying to analyze a situation, then he set the tea and muffin on the desk and stepped up to Rose with his arms out.

She walked into his hug, and buried her nose into his collar. She didn’t remember her dad at all, but if she could have picked a dad to have, it would’ve been someone like Robert.

“Of course it is,” Robert whispered, brushing a kiss to the top of her hair. “I’m so honored.”

Rose smiled into his shirt, feeling so happy and loved.


“Love you, too, darling.”

The rest of the day passed in a whirlwind of delivery people and boxes. James ordered a pizza for everyone around early-afternoon, and afterwards, Robert told them he was going on an errand for a few minutes.

An hour later, he managed to surprise them when he came back with a pantry-full of groceries.

“You always need to eat,” he said when Rose tried to protest the sheer amount of food he’d bought for them. “It’s cheaper to cook than dine out all the time.”

Rose and James thanked him profusely, and started stocking the cabinets and fridge.

As the afternoon waned into the evening, and the people delivering their bedroom set still hadn’t arrived, James was getting worried that he and Rose might have to bite the bullet and stay with
Jackie one more night. But just as they finished shelving their various books and movies, a ring at the door heralded their arrival.

“Is there anything else we can help you unpack?” Jackie asked after Rose and James came back downstairs when their master bedroom was arranged. She glanced around the flat; there were empty boxes littering the floor and random items that hadn’t found a permanent home yet, but apart from that, they were more or less moved in.

“I think we can take it from here,” Rose said. “Thank you all for your help. James and I will have to invite you all ‘round for dinner soon, when we get more settled.”

When they were finally alone in their home, they walked around and made a running list of things they still needed. Mostly their list consisted of decorations and a few bits of furniture to aid in organization, but there were some immediate items they needed, namely toiletries and cleaning supplies.

“Right,” James said. “Fancy a trip to Tesco?”

Twenty minutes later, James was pushing a trolley along as Rose tossed in various shampoos and conditioners and soaps and lotions. He tripped to a stop in the middle of an aisle, and his cheeks heated up as he tried to subtly ask if they might need this particular item soon.

“So… ehm… I was thinking…” He scrubbed his hand across the back of his neck and he stared resolutely at the shelves of condoms rather than at Rose. “D’you think we might be wanting these? Maybe? Might do to stock up just in case, y’know. No harm in being prepared, eh?”

Rose hugged his arm to her chest as she laughed.

“Nah, we’re fine without ‘em.”

James’s stomach dropped. He’d really hoped he could make love to her sometime in the immediate future. He was more than ready for that final step, and he’d thought she had been too. Unless she’d just been humoring him these last few weeks? Maybe she hadn’t been as comfortable with the progress in their intimacy as he’d thought? Oh, God, what if he’d pressured her into touching him and letting him touch her?

Rose must have seen his escalating panic, because she squeezed his arm and said in a rush, “No, no! Not in the way you’re thinking! It’s just… I’m on the pill.”

James’s knees felt weak with relief.

“Oh, thank God,” he breathed, trying to slow his racing heart. “I got really worried for a minute.”

“I’m sorry,” she murmured, leaning up on her tiptoes to brush her lips to his cheek. “You know I’ve loved everything we’ve been doing together, yeah?”

“Yeah,” he answered, tilting his head to brush his lips across hers. “Me too. Why didn’t you tell me you were taking birth control?”

Rose shrugged and said, “There wasn’t really a good time for me to say so, I guess. What would you have had me do, accepted my birthday roses with an added ‘oh by the way, whenever we’re ready to shag, I’ve got us covered, no worries!’”

“Yeah, that might’ve done,” he teased, and then he reached out for a box of condoms anyway. “If it’s all right with you, I’d still rather have some of these. Just in case. Oral contraceptives can be
finicky. If even one dose is missed, we’d be vulnerable to pregnancy.”

Rose smirked up at James. She’d learned about all of this during her trip to her gynecologist, but she knew he sprouted off facts when he was nervous.

They returned home an hour later, laden down with supplies. Rose went to stock their bathroom while James put away the laundry and cleaning supplies.

“What do you want for dinner?” he asked when Rose joined him in the kitchen. He honestly didn’t feel much like cooking, but when he opened up their fridge, he was pleasantly surprised to find the leftover pizza. “Will this do?”

“Absolutely,” Rose said.

They sat at their new dining room table and ate cold pizza, and drank the wine James had opened in celebration.

“We’ll have to get some curtains or something,” James said, nodding to the glass doors that opened to their patio.

Rose hummed in agreement, but for now, she enjoyed her unobstructed view of the setting sun.

Slow and quiet music suddenly filled the silence, and Rose looked over to see James had his phone out.

“Dance with me?” he asked. He stood and held out his hand, and Rose grinned as she was reminded of their first formal date.

She let him pull her to him, and they moved with ease and grace as he rested his hands on her hips and she held on to his shoulders. They moved in slow circles around the room, and Rose rested her head on his chest, letting the steady beat of his heart surround her.

“Welcome home, my Rose,” he whispered into her ear.

“Welcome home, my James,” she replied, and she tilted her head up to catch his lips in a gentle kiss.

She wrapped her arms tighter around his neck to deepen the kiss, sighing in pleasure as familiar heat pooled deep in her stomach. She scratched lightly at his hair, shivering at his appreciative moan.

They explored each other’s mouths as their hands wandered; by now, they knew exactly where to lick, bite, suck, and touch to pull the sweetest of sounds from each other’s lips.

James’s hands dropped to her bum as Rose settled her hip against the firm ridge of him beneath his zipper, and his mouth popped away from her neck.

“Bed?” he asked, slowly grinding into her touch and sighing at the pleasant warmth their movements gave him.

“Yes, please,” she whispered.

They reluctantly broke apart, and Rose grabbed his hand as she led him up the stairs and to their bedroom.

James smiled as they stepped into their room, admiring the way the burgundy duvet looked against the dark woods of the bedframe and chifforobes.
“I want to paint the walls eventually,” Rose said, grimacing at the plain white paint currently on them.

“I suppose the room could do with a splash of color,” James agreed. He stepped up behind her and let his fingertips graze across her breasts as he murmured, “But I think we were in the middle of something else.”

“Quite right,” Rose said, spinning in his arms. She draped her arms around his neck and brushed her lips across his cheek until she whispered in his ear, “Make love to me, James.”

His breath hitched and he leaned back to look at her.

“Are-are you sure?” he asked.

Rose nodded and bit her lip. “Are you?”

“Oh, yes.”

They’d both been wanting to take this next step for a couple weeks now, and their first night in their new flat seemed like the perfect moment.

They took a few moments to strip down to their pants, and crawled onto the bed together. Their nerves had killed some of the heat they’d generated, so Rose rolled onto her back and urged James on top of her, and she reclaimed his lips in a gentle kiss. She felt his muscles relax, and hers followed, as they settled into the familiar territory of snogging.

She let her hands wander across his skin, scraping and teasing, as she felt James reciprocate her touch. He hardened against her hip the longer they touched and tasted each other, and Rose felt her arousal building steadily once more until she was throbbing for him.

James kissed his way down her collarbone, across her breasts, and down her belly. When he peppered kisses down her knickers and overtop where she was aching for him to touch her, Rose sucked in a sharp breath as she sussed out his intentions.

“Can I?” he asked, looking up at her from where he was pressing small, suckling kisses to her inner thighs.

Rose squirmed in equal parts arousal and embarrassment. Did blokes really want to go down on girls?

“You-you don’t have to,” she stuttered, wondering if he would like how she looked, smelled, or tasted.

“I want to,” James said, and Rose couldn’t find any hint of reluctance in his earnest tone. “But if you’re not comfortable with it, I won’t.”

“I want to,” Rose said, the crack in her voice belying some of that bravado. “I just…”

She trailed off helplessly, and she could feel her arousal ebbing again in her nervousness.

James seemed to sense this, and he crawled back up her body to press a series of soft kisses to her lips. She could feel how hot and hard he was in his pants, and she shuddered in desire. She kissed him back and let him play with her breasts as he dipped his hand under her knickers to restoke the flames of her arousal.
His finger slipped through her more easily the longer he kissed her. He moved to the juncture of her neck and shoulder, a place that sent deliciously hot chills into her belly.

“How about I try it,” James suggested, slowly fluttering his middle finger around the sides of her clit, “but if you don’t like it, or still are uncomfortable, I’ll stop?”

Rose breathed out a sigh as she tilted her head back, and she eventually nodded.

James grinned excitedly at her and pressed an enthusiastic kiss to her lips with an exaggerated sucking noise. Rose giggled at her daft soulmate and tried to calm the butterflies in her belly as he settled his shoulders between her thighs once more. She felt his fingertips dip below the waistband of her knickers and tug, and she helpfully lifted her hips to help him slip the scrap of fabric off of her.

“Gorgeous,” he murmured when she was completely bare to him. This was a sight he was sure he would never grow tired of seeing: his soulmate laid out before him, utterly naked, utterly beautiful, and utterly his.

He pressed distracted kisses just above her curls as he shimmied out of his boxers, sighing when the heated flesh of his erection touched their cool sheets.

“Let me know if you want me to stop,” he reminded, kissing her thigh as he swiped his thumb across her clit.

She sucked in a sharp breath, and her legs fell open to give him more room. He hooked one of his arms under her knee before bracing his hand on her hip as he tentatively kissed his way down to where she was damp and throbbing.

Her flavor exploded on his tongue as he swiped it through her folds to lap at her clit, and he was pleased with her shuddering moan. All of her muscles were still tense, and James stroked her hip soothingly as he focused on making this good for her. He had no idea of what he was doing, but he tried to replicate what his fingers had done to give her pleasure, as well as follow his instincts on what he wanted to do to her.

“God, that feels so good,” she moaned, reaching down and burying her hands in his hair.

James preened, so proud of himself that he was able to pleasure Rose so completely. If he could spend the rest of his life between Rose’s thighs, bringing her to orgasm, he would die a very happy man.

His own arousal was building along with Rose’s. Every moan and gasp sizzled down his spine and into his cock, hardening him further with every passing minute. She was getting so wet and squirmy, and he knew she must be close. But just as he was about to slip his finger into her and bring her to orgasm, her fingers tightened in his hair and she gasped, “J-James, stop. Stop.”

James froze, and his belly coiled uncomfortably. Had he hurt her? Was she getting bored with his attentions? Was she frustrated it was taking him so long to make her come.

“What is it?” he asked, willing his voice to stop shaking.

“Was close,” Rose mumbled. Her cheeks were red and her eyes were dark and her breath came in raspy pants. James was confused.

“Wasn’t that the point?” he asked, still not having moved from between her thighs. But when she tugged on his hair and patted his shoulder, he climbed up the length of her body and sprawled out in bed beside her.
“I-I want you inside me,” she murmured, and her cheeks stained a darker pink. “If you’re ready?”

James’s mouth went dry, and he crushed his lips to hers. Oh, this was it! This was the night he would finally get to make love to his soulmate! Arousal and anticipation fizzed through his veins as he kissed her thoroughly and let his fingers trace across any piece of skin he could touch.

“I’m ready,” he murmured when he realized he hadn’t answered. “And you’re sure?”

Rose smiled shyly at him and urged him to crawl on top of her.

He bit his lip as he hovered above her, suddenly so nervous. What if it wasn’t good for her? What if he didn’t last long enough and left her unsatisfied? What if he did it wrong and he hurt her?

“Hey,” she whispered, and she moved her hands to his cheeks. “It’s just me, James. Don’t be afraid.”

James’s eyes fluttered shut at the utter love and trust in her voice. She was right, of course she was right. This was his Rose, and he was her James. There was no one in the universe he would ever feel more comfortable with than her.

He lowered his hips until his erection was nestled against her curls, and he leaned down to lazily move his lips across hers. He swept his tongue against hers and sighed into her mouth when she pulled his bottom lip between her teeth and scraped them across it.

He reached down and swiped a finger through her folds, pleased that she was still so wet. He then took his cock in hand and rubbed the tip of it through her, slicking himself up. She sighed in pleasure as he focused on stimulating her clit, hoping to get her far enough along that she might be able to come.

“Ready?” he asked shakily, letting the tip of his cock bump against her entrance.

“Ready,” she replied, and her fingers tightened in anticipation in his hair.

He pressed in achingly slowly, gritting his teeth against the hot, wet, friction. He met with some resistance, and he paused.

“S’okay,” Rose whispered, but the trembling in her thighs told him otherwise.

James pressed his lips to her forehead as he surged forward.

Rose bit her lip to stifle a whimper as her face pinched in discomfort and her nails dug into the skin of his back.

“Sorry, I’m sorry,” James whispered, curling his arms under her shoulders to hug her. He nuzzled his nose into her neck and pressed soft kisses to that place on her neck that had made her moan earlier, hoping her discomfort would soon go away. She shivered in his arms as he sucked at her skin, feeling the burning pinch fade into the background as her arousal dominated her senses once more.

“I-I think you can move,” Rose said, tilting her hips up against his. “Just… slowly?”

“Of course, love,” James murmured.

He pulled out carefully before slowly sliding back in, watching her face for any hints of pain or displeasure. To his utter relief, the grimace on Rose’s face smoothed out into one of relaxed pleasure and she started to become an active participant in their lovemaking.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss. It was sloppy and ungraceful
as they both were jostled by James’s movements on top of her, but it still felt amazing and their giggles at their lack of coordination helped chisel away at any lingering awkwardness.

James groaned low in his chest as she tightened her thighs around his hips and tightened her inner muscles around his cock, giving him a sudden surge of pleasure.

“Feels so good,” Rose sighed, tentatively lifting her hips to meet his careful thrusts as she mindlessly scraped her nails up and down his spine.

“Yeah,” James grunted, increasing the speed of his thrusts as he was spurred on by a mounting sense of urgency. All too soon, he felt the telltale tingling low in his belly, and he bit his lip as he stopped moving.

“What? What is it?” Rose asked, her muscles clenching torturously around him.

“I-I was about to come,” James admitted, burying his face into her neck as he tried to catch his breath and get a grip on himself. He refused to let their first time be over in less than five minutes, or to leave her unsatisfied. “You feel too good, love. Sorry. Give me a minute.”

“Take your time,” Rose murmured, running her fingers through his hair. Feeling him fill her so fully and completely, even when he wasn’t moving, felt amazing.

He hummed and arched his head closer to her touch before he let her pull him down for a kiss. It was much more graceful now that neither of them were moving, and James sighed against her lips at the warmth bubbling deep inside him, pleasurable but manageable. He sucked on Rose’s bottom lip as he balanced his weight on one of his forearms so he could play with her breasts. She whimpered below him and arched her chest into his hands and thrust her hips up into his. He hissed at the motion, but he felt a little more confident that he wasn’t about to come in the next ten seconds.

“Okay, I think I’m all right,” James whispered. “Ready?”

At her nod, he tentatively arched his hips forward, setting a slow rhythm that felt brilliant for both of them, and James was still so in awe that he was making love with his soulmate, his best friend, the love of his life.

“Oh, Rose,” he moaned, gritting his teeth against the swooping in his belly. “I love this. I love you.”

“My James.” She ran her fingertips up and down his ribs, and her nails occasionally bit into his skin when he moved a certain way that made her see stars. “Love this, too. Love you so much.”

His stomach tightened again in warning as he started aching for harder, faster, more.

“Shit,” he growled, clenching his teeth in frustration as he slowed down once again.

“No, keep going,” Rose begged, digging her feet into his bum to spur him on as she bucked her hips against his. Heat was coiling deep inside her, fanning higher and hotter as they continued moving together, and she was desperate for it to consume her.

“Rose, I’m gonna come soon, love,” he warned urgently, squeezing his eyes shut as he tried to stave off his imminent orgasm.

“Me too,” she grunted, tightening her muscles around him. “God, don’t stop, James, please!”

Sweat broke out on his brow as he willed himself to hold out just a little bit longer, but knew the inevitable climax was mere seconds away.
“Oh, please, love,” he choked out, trembling as the pleasure started to overwhelm him. He was breaking out in hot chills and he was nearly aching with pleasure and desire and desperation. “Come for me, Rose!”

One of Rose’s hands left his shoulders, and he felt the back of her hand graze his stomach before her hot little fingers moved down to where they were joined. He felt her rubbing herself and she panted his name as she clenched around him tighter and tighter.

James whimpered and buried his face into her neck as his hips moved of their own accord, thrusting sloppily into her as he frantically chased his release.

She murmured into his ear and scraped her nails down his back as her legs wrapped more tightly around his hips, cradling him in her, and he was lost. He gasped out her name as his back arched in pleasure more acute than he’d ever felt before.

“F-fuck,” he grunted, pressing his hips flush to hers as waves of aching relief shattered through him.

His face pinched into an expression of pure bliss as Rose felt him pulsing deep inside her. Her stomach swooped and the pressure deep inside her broke as she watched James lose himself to his orgasm.

Her hands scrambled for purchase on any piece of him that she could touch as her own orgasm swelled up within her and flooded her with pleasure more intense than anything she’d ever felt. She cried out his name as she arched beneath him, riding out the last of his climax as hers peaked.

She was barely aware of anything other than the utter love and safety and pleasure she felt in that moment, surrounded by James. God, she loved this man. She loved him so much she ached. Through the black spots in her vision, she looked up at her soulmate: he was breathing harshly against her shoulder, where his forehead was resting, and he was holding himself up on shaking arms.

Rose wrapped her arms around him and tugged, urging him down on her. He followed immediately, and she found his weight comforting rather than crushing. His arms wriggled under her shoulders until he was hugging her as fiercely as she was holding him. He nuzzled his cheek into her breasts and sighed happily, his eyes still closed and his face utterly relaxed.

She moved one of her hands to swipe his hair away from his eyes before she pressed a lingering kiss to his forehead. He leaned into her touch, and he finally forced his eyes open to look at her. Through his dazed, blissful expression, he looked worried.

“Did you come?”

Rose giggled at him and pressed another kiss to his forehead.

“Yeah, I did. You didn’t notice?”

“Was a bit preoccupied,” he said dryly, but Rose could hear his relief and pride mingling in his voice.

“Well I did, and it was wonderful,” Rose murmured, continuing to stroke her fingers through his hair.

“Can’t believe I missed it,” he mumbled. “Travesty.”

“Hmm, I guess you’ll just have to do something to fix that, eh?” she teased.
“Oh, I plan to,” he growled, and he lifted up on his forearms to catch her lips in his.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Wherein we watch Rose and James go through more of their firsts together.

Chapter Notes

Chapter Rating: Explicit (for one scene about half way in)

James’s panting breath tickled against her neck, sending delicious shivers down her spine. Rose could feel his heartbeat thumping against her back, spooned as they were, and she wriggled closer to his warmth, feeling pleasantly drowsy with the sudden rush of endorphins brought on by their lazy morning lovemaking.

Now that they’d finally leapt over that last hurdle of intimacy, they couldn’t seem to get enough of each other.

“I don’t know how I’ll ever let you leave our bed,” Rose murmured, grimacing slightly when she felt him slip out of her. “I love making love with you.”

James hummed happily and brushed his lips across shoulder.

“So do I.” He continued planting soft kisses to whatever patch of skin he could reach until a low gurgling noise soon interrupted them.

“And as much as I’d love to stay in bed with you all day,” James lamented, “I’m starved.”

Rose giggled and kicked her legs free of their blankets before standing on slightly unsteady legs.

“Right, I’m going to shower,” she said, and she suppressed a shudder of desire when she saw how dark his eyes had gotten as they trailed across her naked body. “Oi. Quit ogling. Food. Breakfast. Go make.”

James growled and bounced out of bed after her, and pulled her tight along the length of his body. Rose was pleasantly surprised when she felt him twitching in renewed interest against her hip.

“Insatiable.”

“Food can wait,” he mumbled, crashing his lips to hers in a heated kiss, so very different from the ones he’d woken her up with. “Got a nice, new, big shower. We ought to test it out together, don’t you think?”

“Nutter,” Rose said fondly, gasping when he bit down on the sensitive skin at the join of her neck and shoulder.

“Your nutter,” he said distractedly as he continued to scrape his teeth against her skin. “Another first for us to tick off the list: showering together.”
Over the next few weeks, when James and Rose weren’t exploring their newfound intimacy, they were continuing to shop for various accessories to make their flat homier. They found curtains and decorations and smaller shelving units to help de-clutter the rooms in the flat, and with every passing day, it became more and more like home. And finally, the end of August came, and it was time for school to start.

“Ready for your first day of classes, love?” James asked as he poured them both tea.

“Yep,” she said, but James could hear the nerves in her voice.

“You’ll be brilliant,” James assured, plopping down in his seat. He reached out and covered her foot with his.

“Any last-minute advice?” she asked weakly.

“Be yourself, use office hours,” James said, ticking them off on his fingers. “Oh! Find a buddy or two in all of your classes. Forming a study group will help you all succeed in the class. School is much more fun when you surround yourself with people who are invested in learning, and not in just getting good grades. And honestly, the first few days, you don’t do much.”

Rose nodded and swiped her thumb across the lip of her mug.

A half hour later, she was walking hand in hand with James across campus to her first class of the day, a composition and rhetoric class.

“Don’t be nervous,” he said, squeezing her hand. He brought their hands to his lips and brushed soft kisses across her knuckles. “You’re brilliant. Let’s meet for lunch once you’re done for the day. There’s a little café on the science side of campus. We can make that our lunchtime hangout spot, if you want?”

Rose giggled at James, knowing he was rambling to help calm her worries, and she appreciated that. Though it turns out, she had no reason to worry. She took a shine to university life, like James knew she would, and quickly made friends with half of her classmates, also like James knew she would. Nobody could meet Rose Tyler and not immediately be smitten, and he was smugly proud that this woman was destined for him, out of everyone else in the universe.

The first half of the semester flew by, and Rose was quite ready for the midterm break. She used the extended weekend to catch up on sleep and a few projects she had been neglecting, and she wished James could have done the same. But because he didn’t take classes, he didn’t follow the same academic calendar she did, and he continued to pull long hours in his lab.

There were often days where the only time Rose saw him was when they were in bed together, and even then, it’s hard to socialize with a sleeping person. He made it a point to keep the weekends lab-free, though, and even if he had work to do, he did it in the flat. Rose was thankful for those hours on the weekends she could spend with him.

One morning in the middle of October, Rose crept down the stairs as quietly as she could. James was still asleep, and after his restlessness last night, she was loath to wake him. He’d come to bed after midnight, and his tossing and turning kept her up for most of the night too.

He’d also awoken her with a strangled sob before he rolled over to cuddle her. She’d thought she was about to cry for him when he buried his face into her neck and held her close as he breathed
raggedly against her skin. But when she’d asked if he wanted to talk about it, he sniffled and whispered, “It’s just a dream,” and continued spooning her until he fell back to sleep.

He’d slept more peacefully after that, but Rose was utterly exhausted, despite the late hour of the morning. She knew James had to be even worse off; his sleeping patterns had become wild and unpredictable since school started, and she worried he wasn’t getting enough rest.

Rose yawned widely as she scooped coffee grounds into the coffee maker, then turned around to start on breakfast. She quickly whipped up pancakes, a favorite of James’s when he wasn’t in a good mood, and fried up some eggs to go with it.

Breakfast and coffee were eventually ready, but James was still asleep. She bit her lip and cast a glance up the stairs. Should she wake him? He really ought to eat something. He’d written to her last night that he would be home late, and she should eat without him, and she knew his dinner most likely consisted of a package of crisps left over from his lunch. If that.

Rose sighed heavily. It was killing her to see James working himself ragged, and she felt so helpless. She wanted so badly to go back to that youthful, carefree boy who stayed up late just so he could talk with her for a few minutes longer.

She grabbed a banana and sliced it up, putting most of it on a plate, but arranging some of the pieces into a smiley face onto one of the pancakes. She then rifled through their cabinets until she found a tray, and she loaded it up with food and their coffee before she walked up the stairs.

She heard the toilet flush as she reached for the bedroom door, and she was glad at least that she wasn’t about to wake him. She walked into the room and set their breakfast on the bedside table as she walked into their en suite. James looked a mess. His eyes were bloodshot and had dark bags under them, and his chin was covered in stubble. But he managed a smile for her when he caught sight of her.

“I’ve made us breakfast,” Rose said, reaching for his hand as he picked up his toothbrush. “Come. Have breakfast in bed with me. We’ve not done that in a while.”

“I’m not all that hungry.”

“You have to eat, love,” she reprimanded. “Please? Because I know you probably haven’t had anything more substantial than the dinner we made the night before last.”

His guilty expression did nothing to ease her concerns. She reached out and touched his cheek.

“Please eat with me, love?” she asked.

James sighed and leaned into her hand. He turned his head to press a kiss to her palm and whispered, “Okay.”

They crawled back into bed and settled the platter of food across their laps. James immediately went for the coffee, and sat back against their pillows as he cradled the mug in his hands.

“More than coffee,” Rose chastised gently, nudging a pancake his way. “Look, it’s happy to see you.”

James’s face relaxed into a genuine smile that sent Rose’s heart fluttering in her chest. He scooted closer to her and tucked his arm around her waist as he cut up his pancake, making the perfect bite of banana, pancake, and eggs.
He hummed appreciatively as he chewed and said, “These are great. Thanks, love.”

He scarfed down the smiley pancake with enthusiasm, and continued sipping at his coffee as he picked at the rest of their food. Rose was so pleased when he’d managed to stuff down two pancakes, half of his eggs, and all of the banana, and her eyes prickled that she was excited for such a thing.

“Please promise me you’ll try and take better care of yourself,” Rose asked, resting her head against his shoulder.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re hardly eating,” Rose whispered. She rubbed at her stinging nose as tears filled her eyes. “You’re not sleeping.”

“I’m just busy, love,” James soothed. “You know how hectic school is.”

“I’m really worried about you,” she admitted, looking up at him.

James caught sight of her tears, and his brow furrowed. He kissed her forehead and murmured, “I’m okay, love. Really. This past month has been really busy. Things will slow down once the deadline for this grant passes.”

“Can you promise me you’ll try to look after yourself better?” Rose asked again, cuddling into his side.

“I promise.” He set his empty coffee cup on their tray, and moved the tray to the bedside table to better hold her. “I don’t think I’ve said it, but thank you for taking such good care of me.”

Rose hugged him tight and murmured, “Of course, my James. That’s what you do for someone you love.”

Admittedly, James’s schedule did die down a little after October seventeenth passed, and his grant proposal was submitted. He came home that night looking so relieved, and Rose was overjoyed when he told her he was taking the rest of the week off to recharge before getting back to his lab work.

They took that time to be with each other, and they explored more of the city that was their home. When James woke Rose up early on Saturday morning to tell her he had a great day planned for them, Rose was so happy to see a spark of excitement in his eyes, that she let herself be tugged into their car as he drove an hour south.

He took them to an autumn festival in a tiny town in the country, much to Rose’s delight, and they wandered around pumpkin patches, drank mulled wine, and raced each other through a corn maze. Rose had more fun than she’d had in a while, and it was nice to see James so relaxed and carefree.

“Did you have fun?” he asked as he loaded the pumpkins they’d painted into the boot of the car.

“I did. Thank you for today.” She stretched up and placed a kiss on his pink cheek.

“Sorry I’ve been kind of distant lately,” he said, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear. “I’m still trying to figure out time management. Always been sort of rubbish at that.”

“I know you’re busy, and working hard. I’ll take any time you can give me.”
He smiled in gratitude, and caught her lips between his.

Rose awoke before James, as was becoming more typical of late. Despite his assurances that his schedule would be less hectic once he submitted his grant proposal, he was still in the same habits as before. He came to bed later and awoke up earlier and holed himself away in their home office on most weekends, and Rose was worried he was running himself into exhaustion.

She sighed and rolled closer to him. She rested her head onto his pillow, so close to his face that she nearly went cross-eyes trying to trace his freckles. She closed her eyes and rested her forehead against his and lay her palm on his chest.

He sighed in his sleep, and wriggled closer to her. She smiled and kissed his nose, knowing he would soon be waking.

Rose lightly scratched at the hair on his chest, delighting in his deep, rumbling groan. She bit her lip against a grin and let her fingers wander down his chest to the flat planes of his stomach, before she discreetly traced her fingers across the front of his boxers, where he was already half hard.

His sharp inhale of breath told him that he was finally awake, and very aware of her touch. She pressed a quick kiss to his lips before her lips followed the trail her hand had made. She tossed the blankets to his feet as she scraped her teeth across the tips of his hipbones, peaking out as they were from the waistband of his pants.

“Rose,” he groaned as she continued to palm him through is pants.

“Shh, just relax and enjoy.”

She carefully tugged him out of the front slit in his boxers, and licked a slow line from the base of his cock to the tip. His hips jerked up sharply.

“Bloody hell, Rose!”

“Relax and enjoy,” she repeated, draping her arm across his waist to hold him steady.

She stroked him leisurely and pressed gentle kisses to his erection until his muscles unclenched and he relaxed into the mattress.

She laved her tongue across him once again, and he hummed loudly in pleasure, which choked off into a moan when she sucked the tip of him into her mouth. She savored him, and cradled him delicately on her tongue as she slowly took him deeper into her mouth, stopping just before he could bump the back of her throat. She wrung her fingers around the base of him to stroke the part of him she couldn’t reach as she pulled off him, applying light suction as she went.

“Shit, Rose,” he groaned brokenly. His thighs tensed and trembled against his urge to thrust up into her mouth, and he tried to force his muscles to relax, as she’d told him to, so he could enjoy what she was doing.

Rose, meanwhile, saw his aborted attempts to thrust up, and took that as a signal to increase her pace. She focused on the tip of him, and swirled her tongue around him, tasting the tang of the fluid he was leaking.

“Gonna come,” he grunted in warning a few moments later, clenching and unclenching his hands into their sheets.
Rose hummed around him and reached out blindly for his hand. He took it clumsily and lost the battle with his hips. He thrust up once as his fingers tightened around hers. Rose looked up at him, wanting to see him come, loving when she could uninterruptedly watch him.

He sucked in a breath, and Rose drummed her tongue against the head of his cock as her mouth was filled with his release. He arched his back, digging his head into his pillow as he struggled to keep his hips from thrusting further into her mouth as he lost himself to his pleasure. He panted and moaned and whimpered her name as Rose swallowed him down.

His body went limp and boneless, and he was silent save for his ragged breathing. She felt him start to soften in her mouth, and she pulled off of him to crawl up the length of his body.

She settled herself into his awaiting arms, and was rather pleased with his flushed and heaving chest and the relaxed look of pleasure still lingering on his face.

“Happy Birthday, my love,” Rose murmured, pressing a kiss to his chest.

“Thank you,” he whispered hoarsely, hugging her close as he let his fingertips trail down to her knickers.

But to James’s surprise, she snatched his hand away and hugged it to her chest.

“You don’t want me to return the favor?” James asked.

“It’s your birthday,” she said. “Besides, I’m on my period.”

“Again?”

Rose swatted his chest. “Funny thing, it happens every month, love.”

“You didn’t answer my question. If you want, I’ll still reciprocate. Well, perhaps not with my mouth, but I honestly don’t mind with my fingers, and…”

“Thanks,” Rose murmured, happy that he even offered. “But I’m quite all right. Not really in the mood today.”

“All right, if you’re sure,” James murmured, nuzzling into her neck.

“Want your birthday gift now or later?” Rose asked, stroking his hair away from her nose.

“Oh, I thought you’d already given me my present,” James said, and Rose could hear the grin in his voice.

“Consider that part one.” She leaned over and rummaged through her bedside table and grabbed a small package.

James sat up, and Rose followed. He accepted the gift gratefully and started to tug off the wrapping paper, which revealed a small white box. He lifted the lid and his lungs hitched when he saw a familiar pocket watch nestled in the black velvet.

“Rose, is this…?”

“I had it repaired for you,” Rose murmured, watching as James took the pocket watch and turned it around in his fingers.

His thumb brushed across the newly-restored hinge, and he flicked it open to reveal the first watch
face, and he flipped it to reveal the second, both in perfect working order.

“I saw it when we were in San Francisco,” Rose said. “I hoped you don’t mind I took it.”

“Not at all,” James murmured. “I just figured Dad had it. Thank you.”

Rose smiled, glad he seemed to like her gift. She pressed a kiss to his knuckles and said, “Right! What does the birthday boy want for breakfast?”

“Pancakes?” he asked eagerly.

Rose rolled her eyes. “You know, I never thought a sweet breakfast food would be at all appetizing until I met you.”

“They are the epitome of breakfast foods, Rose,” he said seriously.

“Maybe across the pond,” Rose scoffed, poking his chest. “All right, pancakes it is. Chocolate chip?”

He grinned and nodded, and he went off to shower as Rose prepared his birthday breakfast.

Rose had just put his plate of food on the dining table, when James walked in holding his phone out in front of him.

“Say hi to Rose!” he said, and he flipped his phone around so Rose could see Robert’s face.

“Hi, Dad!” She skipped up to James’s side so James could speak to his dad too, and so she could get a better look at Robert. But she did a double take when she saw him. They’d only seen him two months ago, when they made dinner for him, Jackie, and Mickey as thanks for helping them move, but in that time, he’d noticeably picked up a bit of weight. His face was round and pink, and though Rose couldn’t see anything past his shoulders, she imagined his gut had expanded too. And he looked absolutely exhausted. Rose wanted to cry when she saw him, and she wanted to hop on a plane to Scotland and take care of him.

“Blimey, Dad, you might want to consider laying off the muffins, eh?”

Rose elbowed him sharply in the gut. “Rude!” she hissed.

Robert chuckled wryly and said, “No, no, he’s right. I have put on a few pounds.”

“Are you all right?” Rose asked softly, scanning her eyes across his face critically.

His smile stiffened, and he said, “Oh, don’t worry about me! This is James’s day!”

“Dad,” Rose chastised softly, and his smile slipped.

Rose felt James stiffen beside her, and she glanced up at him. Worry had his brow pinched in a tight furrow, and the hand holding his phone was starting to shake.

“Dad, what’s wrong?” he asked.

“I thought I’d be doing all right here,” Robert murmured. “You know, at least I’m not five thousand miles away from family. But I still…” He sniffed sharply, and Rose’s heart broke when she saw his shining eyes. “No matter! It’s all an adjustment. Finding the new normal, eh?”

“What have you been doing with yourself, if not working?” James asked.

“You know,” Rose said carefully, “there are loads of good schools in and around London you could work at.”

“Yeah,” James said, picking up her idea. “You don’t have to stay in Scotland by yourself. Move closer to us. Give us someone to visit now and then who isn’t Rose’s mum.”

Rose stuck her tongue out at him before turning her attentions back to Robert.

“We’d love to see more of you,” Rose said softly. “We miss you.”

Robert was blinking rapidly, and Rose felt her own eyes pricking with tears when she saw his.

“I miss you, too,” he said raggedly, rubbing his hands across his face. “God, this is pathetic, eh? Old man moving closer to his grown son because he’s lonely.”

“It’s not pathetic,” Rose choked out, and she felt James’s hand clench around her own. “And you’re not old. We’re worried about you.”


“Please think about it,” Rose asked.

“I will,” Robert promised, smiling gently. “But enough about me. How are you two?”

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“How’s this one look?” Rose asked, dragging him to another tree.

James shrugged, not really looking at it. “A tree’s a tree. Let’s just pick one and leave.”

Rose’s face fell, and James cursed himself. This was their first Christmas together; he ought to be more enthusiastic. Getting a tree was the height of tradition, but he wasn’t feeling all that festive.

“Sorry, love,” he said breezily, pecking a kiss to her forehead. “It’s the cold talking. I’d much rather be at home and in bed with you. That’d get us warm quite quickly, eh?”

He waggled his eyebrows, but Rose didn’t smile at his attempt to make light of the situation.

“I really am sorry,” he whispered. He turned towards the tree and inspected it closely. It was about his height, good shape, but there was a bit of a thin spot in the back. “Nah, this one’s no good.” He looked around the lot, quickly scanning and analyzing their choice of trees. “How about this one?”

Rose let herself be pulled along at a fast jog, and her giggles eased James’s guilt. Even if he wasn’t in the mood, he sure as hell wasn’t spoiling this for Rose. Too much of this year had already been spoiled.

They inspected another four trees, and just when James’s patience was about to run out again, they both decided on a tree.

Getting it home was a laugh, and they were both covered in pine needles and sap by the time it was sitting in its stand in their living room. Boxes of new decorations and some donated ones from
Robert were strewn across the floor, and Rose grinned happily at James.

“Y’know, I never had a real tree before,” she said, hugging his arm to his chest.

He frowned and blinked down at her. “No?”

“Nope. Live trees are expensive. And you have to get one every year. Mum wanted to use that money on other things.”

James sighed and tugged his arm away from her chest to wrap it around her shoulders, even more determined to make this Christmas the best bloody Christmas Rose had ever had.

But as the days ticked closer to the twenty-fifth, James’s mood was frostier than even the weather. They weren’t having Christmas at his home in Scotland, for the first time in his memory. And while he was glad he wouldn’t have to face a week in a house full of relatives who would probably all be looking at him and his dad pityingly, he couldn’t help but feel the loss of his most beloved Christmas tradition.

Robert had accepted a job offer from one of Oxford’s satellite universities, and had spent most of December moving to a flat forty miles south of James and Rose’s home. That was where they were going to be having Christmas dinner, with Jackie, Mickey, and Rita-Anne as well.

And meanwhile, James tried to be happy and excited about the holiday season, but found himself falling short on many occasions.

“I’m so sorry,” James whispered miserably on Christmas Eve after Rose brought him a plate of Christmas biscuits she’d made herself when he told her he didn’t feel like baking. “It’s just… All of last year, I was celebrating my lasts with you until we could finally be together and celebrate holidays together. And all the while they were my lasts with my mum as well. And now that we can celebrate our firsts, I’m not in the mood, but I should be, because we can only have one series of firsts, and I’m mucking it all up!”

“You’re not mucking anything up,” Rose assured, wrapping him into a tight hug. “This year has been more difficult than we planned. You’re still grieving and healing, and that’s all right.”

“I am mucking it up,” James mumbled into her shoulder. “I want to be happy with you. I am happy with you!”

“I know you are, love,” Rose whispered, stroking her fingers softly through his hair. “But it’s okay to let yourself be sad, too. I can’t imagine what you’re feeling. I lost my dad, but I don’t remember him. And while I miss him, I don’t have any memories to miss. But you… you had twenty-three years with your mum. That’s not going to go away overnight.”

“I wish I could erase this whole year,” James mused quietly, “and start again. I’ll move out of Boston and come to Scotland, and wait there until your birthday. I shouldn’t’ve gone to stay with my parents! If I’d just come back to the UK, my mum would be here!”

“No, James, don’t do that to yourself,” Rose said, her heart breaking. “Don’t do that. You’ll drive yourself mad.”

“Can’t get any madder,” he muttered to her shirt.

“Don’t play the what-if game,” she said firmly. “The past is the past. We can’t change it, so there is no use in dwelling in it.”
He sighed heavily, and kept his nose buried in her neck, taking comfort in her warmth and scent.

She pressed her lips to the side of his head and cradled his neck, her heart breaking for him. He’d been trying so hard to make this Christmas wonderful for them, but Rose could tell he wasn’t in the Christmas spirit.

“Have you considered seeing someone?” Rose asked quietly.

“Well,” he drawled, and Rose sighed in frustration as he tried to use humor to get himself out of this serious conversation. “I’m kind of already soulmated. Not sure if she’s agreeable to an open relationship.”

“I’m serious, James,” she insisted, pulling back to try and catch his gaze. “You should try speaking to someone about how you’re feeling.”

“I talk to you,” he argued, furrowing his brow.

“But I still don’t think you tell me everything,” Rose said, and she covered his lips with her fingers when he tried to protest. “I really think you should talk to someone. I’m trying my best to help you, but I can only do so much.”

“You’ve been wonderful,” James said softly, pressing a kiss to her fingers. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if this had happened before I met you. I think I would’ve broken the rule and gone to see you, even if you weren’t eighteen.”

Rose sighed. While she usually loved his stubbornness, she was tired of having to fight him on this particular conversation.

“At least keep it in mind?” she asked, reaching up to cradle his cheeks in her palms.

“I promise,” he said, turning his head to press a kiss to her palm. “Now, time for bed, I think. Can’t be here when Santa comes, it’ll ruin the magic.”

Rose rolled her eyes, not entirely convinced that he was taking her and her suggestion seriously, but let herself be tugged to their bedroom.

The next morning found them sitting together in their pjs in front of their Christmas tree, about to exchange gifts.

“You first,” James said eagerly, handing her a heavy box.

Rose delicately set it in her lap—heavy meant expensive or breakable—and she carefully unwrapped her gift.

“Oh, wow!”

Rose finished ripping off the wrapping paper to reveal a box with a picture of a camera on it. She chucked aside the paper and lifted the box, scanning an eager eye over the model and the features of her new camera.

“You like it?” James asked softly.

“Oh, I love it!” Rose exclaimed, still looking at the camera. She had absolutely loved the photography class she had taken, and she had signed up for another one for the spring semester. She was excited to use a camera of her own, rather than loan one out from the school. She set the box
down and turned to James. “Thank you.”

She wrapped her hand around his neck and tugged him in for a kiss, hoping he knew how grateful she was for the gift. He hummed into the kiss before breaking it, and resting his forehead against hers.

“Your turn,” she whispered, handing him a thin, square package.

He took it eagerly and ripped it open, revealing a sketchpad. His lungs hitched as he chucked the wrapping paper aside and opened it to the first page.

*My James,*

*This year was harder than we ever predicted, and I am so proud of you, and so glad to call you my soulmate. There is so much beauty in the world, though nothing will ever be more beautiful than my time spent with you.*

*Always yours,*

*Rose*

James’s hands shook as he flipped through the pages, all of them filled with her drawings, and he was taken aback by how many were of him, or of the past eight months of their lives together. Some of the drawings were quick sketches, others were detailed and fully-colored. But they were all perfect.

“I started making that for you last January,” Rose murmured, crawling to sit beside him. She rested her cheek on his shoulder and watched him skim through the sketchbook.

James felt tears clog his throat as he looked at her drawings, particularly the ones of him. The care and precision in these pictures made it so obvious they were drawn by someone that loved him deeply.

He inhaled raggedly and set the sketchbook aside in favor of pulling her into his lap.

“Thank you,” he croaked, burying his face in her neck as he wrapped his arms tight around her.

“Thank you so much, Rose. They’re absolutely beautiful.”

“I’m glad you like them,” she murmured, hugging him close.

“I always love seeing what you’ve drawn,” he whispered, pressing light kisses to her shoulder. “You are the most creative, talented, beautiful…”

He trailed off, hoping she knew how proud and in awe of her he was, and how thankful he was that she was his soulmate.

**oOoOo**

Rose wandered around the campus with her camera in hand. It had snowed the night before, and everything was covered in glittering white powder, and she used it as an opportunity to play with her new camera, as well as explore areas of the school she didn’t visit as much. She was currently hiking up the steps of one of the theater buildings to get a reprieve from the cold.

She stepped inside, shivering as her nose, cheeks, and ears tingled at the warm air in the building. She carefully tucked her camera into the travel bag and meandered through the halls. Posters
advertising the spring play were already up, and she made a mental note of the date, hoping James could find an evening he wasn’t busy to join her at a performance.

She descended a staircase into the basement level, and found an old piano sitting at the end of the hall. It looked worn and rickety, and Rose idly brushed her fingers over the keys, surprised but pleased when the old instrument worked.

She tapped out a small jingle from a television commercial she had stuck in her head, and winced a bit when she heard how out-of-tune the instrument was.

“Do you play?”

Rose jumped at the sound of a low voice. She spun around and saw a man in jeans and a jumper smirking at her.

“S-sorry,” Rose said, her cheeks burning. “I was just wandering around. Am I not allowed to be here?”

The boy shook his head and grinned. “Nah, students are generally allowed anywhere. If a door is unlocked, there’s a good chance it’s open to anyone. I’ve never seen you around here, though. Are you a theater student?”

Rose shook her head. “No. Art.”

“And do you play?” the boy asked, nodding to the piano.

“I did,” Rose said. “Haven’t played all semester. I forgot how much I missed it.”

The boy looked her up and down, and said, “Come with me.”

Rose bit her lip as she hesitated.

“I’m not planning on attacking you or anything,” he said wryly. “But there’s a better piano in the practice room. If you’re interested?”

Rose looked him up and down, before she nodded and followed him.

“I’m Murray, by the way,” he said as he led her down the hall.

“Rose.”

“Hello, Rose. What year are you, if I might ask?”

“It’s my first year,” Rose said. “You?”

“Third,” he replied. “I’m due to graduate this spring. Ah, here we are!”

Murray gestured into the room, where another old piano sat at the front.

“The pianos we use for concerts and such are much grander than these rickety old ones,” he said with a wink.

Rose couldn’t help but snort, and she let herself be led to the instrument. She experimentally pressed on a few keys, and released a breath when she realized it was still perfectly tuned, despite its obvious age and use.
“Feel free to play a bit,” Murray said, tugging out the bench.

Rose raised her eyebrow.

“Okay, what are you playing at?” Rose demanded, crossing her arms across her chest.

He furrowed his brows. “Nothing. You said you liked to play, but haven’t in a while, and this instrument is better than that piece of shite down the hall.”

Rose continued glaring at him, and smirked in triumph when his cheeks turned red.

“I’m actually part of the orchestra group on campus,” he admitted. “The only pianist in the group. Our director is getting worried because so far, we don’t have any underclassmen to replace me. I heard someone playing—quite well, honestly, despite the horrid tuning on that old thing—and well…”

“You decided on an impromptu audition?” Rose teased, relaxing her tense posture as she sat down on the bench. She delicately touched the keys, not playing them, but simply feeling the cool, smooth keys beneath her fingertips. She hadn’t touched a piano since she’d finished school last spring, and she found herself itching to get back into it.

“Go on,” Murray encouraged. “Just a little tune?”

Rose rolled her eyes, and tried to ignore the fact that someone was watching her, as she played a medley of Disney songs she’d had memorized since she was fourteen.

“I’m a bit rusty,” Rose apologized when her fingers fumbled on a few notes.

“Nothing a bit of practice can’t clean off,” Murray said, beaming at her. “That’s lovely. So, might you be interested in joining the orchestra?”

“Dunno,” Rose said honestly. “Never thought about it.”

“Tell you what,” he said. “We practice every Tuesday and Thursday night in this room. Stop by if you’re interested, and you can test the waters and see if you might want to join.”

Rose nodded, and stood from the bench.

“Right,” he said cheerfully. “Well, seeing as I’m full of propositions today, can I take you to lunch some time?”

Rose balked, and crossed her arms across her chest.

“I’m soulmated,” she said coolly. She liked Murray, and she really hoped he was one of those blokes that would be able to accept her unavailability with grace.

“Ah, rotten luck,” he said good-naturedly. “Oh, well. In any case, it was nice to make your acquaintance, Rose! Perhaps I’ll see you this Tuesday? 7pm.”

Rose shrugged, despite the pit of longing in her belly. She followed him out of the room and bade him goodbye as she started walking back home.

She thought about Murray’s invitation all weekend, until finally on Tuesday morning, she told James, “I won’t be home for dinner tonight. I’m considering joining the orchestra, and one of the senior members invited me to practice with the group tonight to test it out.”
“That’s great!” James said enthusiastically. “I think you’ll really like that!”

She did really like it. Playing the piano came back to her quickly, much to her delight, and she was so happy to be playing the instrument once more.

The director of the orchestra was overjoyed to see her, too, and while she wasn’t officially part of the orchestra yet, and wouldn’t be until the next school year, he enthusiastically welcomed Rose to all of their practice sessions so she would be able to hit the ground running.

She felt a little guilty, though, that she was leaving James alone two nights a week, but he vehemently reassured her that he could fend for himself just fine.

And while he missed her very much on the nights she was practicing with the orchestra, James was so pleased she’d found an activity that brought her so much joy. *Besides,* he told himself, *now I won’t have to feel guilty for staying late at the office.*

He was working hard on his research, but he’d lost his interest in it almost from the moment he’d started it. And it frustrated him to no end, because he genuinely *liked* what he was doing, but his increasing levels of apathy were making it hard for him to concentrate.

He scrubbed a weary hand across his face as he flipped back to the beginning of the journal article he was supposed to be reading, cursing himself when he realized he’d zoned out for the third time and hadn’t absorbed any of the information.

“Why don’t you call it a night, James?” his advisor suggested as he walked past James’s office and saw him with his head in his hands. “Lord knows you pull more hours than any of us. Go on. Go home to Rose.”

“She’s at orchestra,” he said distractedly, rubbing his finger into his burning eyes.

“And then go and surprise her with dessert or something for when she gets home,” his supervisor said firmly. “The article will be here for you tomorrow. Go on. You’re one of our best students, James; I don’t want to see you burn out.”

James sighed, and reluctantly tucked the article into his desk drawer.

“Good lad,” his advisor said. “Say hi to Rose. And goodnight, James. See you tomorrow.”

James packed up his things and made the quick walk home.

Their semesters were flying by quickly, with Rose utterly loving school, and James utterly dreading it. It was getting harder for him to get himself into his lab in the mornings, and he hated himself for it. This was what he’d wanted his whole life, and if he wasn’t careful, he could muck up the future of his academic career.

Rose tried to cheer him up as best she could, and she continued urging him to talk to a counselor, but there was only so much she could do when he vehemently denied that he needed help.

“I just need to keep busy!” he insisted.

And as April twenty-fifth—the anniversary of his mother’s death—drew nearer, he was getting more and more manic.

He took that day off, and snapped at Rose to go to her classes when she offered to stay home with him. He wanted to rip his hair out when he saw her jump and blink back tears.
What a fucking mess, he groaned when Rose locked the front door behind her on her way to class.

It was Rose’s long day, too. She would be in photography lab all afternoon, and then she had orchestra practice tonight as well. James desperately wanted to call her and ask her to cancel the rest of her day so he wouldn’t be alone, but he dismissed that idea immediately. No need to ruin her day, too. Especially not after she had offered this morning and he had so vehemently refused.

He instead grabbed his keys and made the drive to his dad’s house, knowing he would probably need the support today, too.

oOoOo

Nineteen perfect roses for my perfect Rose on her nineteenth birthday. A very happy birthday to you, my love, and to many more to come. I love you. James. Rose grinned at the card, and at the vase full of roses sitting at her place on the dining table. “Are you going to keep buying me as many roses as I am years old.”

“Might do,” he teased, pressing an enthusiastic kiss to her lips with an over-the-top sucking noise.

“They’re beautiful. Thank you.”

“So, what shall we do today?” he asked eagerly, rubbing his hands together. “Sky’s the limit. Just tell me, and we’ll do it. We could explore the city. Visit a museum. Go on a hike.”

“I think I want to stay in, if that’s all right?” Rose asked.

James wrinkled his nose. “Stay in? That’s boring!”

“It’s what I want to do,” she said firmly. James had been in a mood for about a week now. Well, in more of a mood than normal. She knew the anniversary of his mum’s death had been hard for him; it had been hard for her too. Not only was she still grieving that she would never meet his mother, but she was grieving for him, and how hurt he still was. A quiet day in, just her and him and no schoolwork was what she was desperately craving.

“Fine,” he sighed, and he finished up her birthday breakfast.

However, a quiet day in wasn’t as peaceful as Rose would have wanted. James was restless, and he kept offering to take her out on the town almost every hour. She was about to accept just to get him to stop asking.

Instead, she stayed silent, and tried to relax against him as they started a new Netflix series together.

She was near tears that night when James moaned, once again, that she had picked the most boring things to do on her birthday.

“So hanging out with me is boring, is it?” she finally snapped, upending the basket of clean laundry onto their bed so they could fold it.

“Don’t be stupid,” he scoffed.

“Don’t call me that,” she snarled, clenching her hands into fists. “I wanted a nice, relaxing day with you! I so rarely have those anymore! You’ve been overworking yourself all year!”

“Oh, well I’m sorry that getting a doctorate degree is more work than you thought it would be! I’m sorry my education is getting in the way of the life you envisioned for us!” he spat harshly, strangling
the mismatched pair of socks he had in his hands.

“I didn’t mean it like that!” she cried, frustrated to the point of tears. “You’re working yourself too hard, James! And you’re ignoring the fact that you’ve been depressed for the last twelve months!”

“I am not depressed,” James said through clenched teeth, “I’m busy! There’s a difference!”

“Don’t you dare do this! Not again, I’m sick of it! You’re obviously not all right, so stop trying to convince me that you are!” Rose said hotly. “We promised not to lie to each other, James.”

“I’m fine,” he bit out, folding a t-shirt with more force than necessary. “Just leave it!”

Rose huffed out a frustrated breath as she shook her head and stalked out of the bedroom.

James squeezed his hands into a tight fist. All he wanted was to let Rose have a happy birthday. It was all mucked up last year, and he’d be damned if it got ruined this year too. But how was he supposed to give her the best birthday he could when she wouldn’t let him do anything?!

Rose came back into their room a few minutes with an empty duffle bag in her hands. James watched with a growing pit in his stomach as she shoved random articles of clothes into the bag.

“Rose, what are you doing?” he asked, his fear and exasperation making the question sound like a demand.

“Packing,” she said shortly.

“I can see that,” he snapped. “Why?”

“I’m so tired, James,” she said wearily, and James’s heart stuttered when he heard her voice crack with tears. “I’m tired of trying to get you to talk to me, to anyone, about your depression. I’m tired of listening to you tell me you’re fine when you’re obviously not. I’m tired of pretending that it doesn’t hurt when you pull away from me, or deny that you need help. I’m just… tired.”

“You’re leaving?” he whispered through the lump in his throat.

“I’m going to visit my mum for a little bit. I mean, it is my birthday.” She chuckled weakly and swiped at her teary eyes. “I think she ought to be part of this day too. And… And I think we need a little time apart. Take a breather. I won’t talk with you when we’re both this angry.”

James’s knees shook and his ears rang as Rose zipped up her bag.

“Rose, please.”

“I want you to really think about the direction you want our relationship to take,” she murmured. “I love you. God, I love you so much, James. But you’re breaking my heart every time you try to convince me and yourself that you’re okay.”

“Please don’t go,” he begged hoarsely. “Please? I’m sorry. I’ll talk to someone, I promise.”

Rose shook her head sadly. “You don’t mean that. And if I stay, we’ll be having the same argument next week. And I can’t do this again.”

“Please,” he choked out.

“It’s just for a little while,” she assured. “We both need time to cool down and think. I love you more than anything. Remember that, my James.”
She leaned up and pressed her lips to his cheek and walked out of their bedroom.

James watched numbly as she walked away from him, and he heard the front door open and close. He peeked through the window and saw her get into a taxi that drove away into the night.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Wherein James and Rose resolve their fight and work together to move forward.

Chapter Notes

Chapter Rating: Explicit (one scene at the end)

This is the penultimate chapter!! One more to go in this story!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

James watched numbly as she walked away from him, and he heard the front door open and close. He peeked through the window and saw her get into a taxi that drove away into the night.

“Fuck,” he whispered, rubbing the heels of his palms into his burning eyes. “FUCK!”

He kicked at the bedframe, ignoring the spike of pain in his toes as his tears overflowed and dampened his cheeks. He sank down onto the edge of the bed and sobbed into his hands.

All he’d wanted was to give Rose a nice birthday without dragging her into his foul mood. He’d wanted so badly to be happy and excited and celebratory with her, and he’d hoped if he ignored his dark mood, it would go away and leave Rose unspoiled.

Look how brilliantly that worked.

James’s heart ached with loneliness and guilt, and he wanted so badly to call Rose and beg her to come home. But she was so angry with him and he’d hurt her so badly without even realizing it. He’d tried to spare her his own grief and anger, but he’d instead made it all worse.

Rose deserved so much better than him.

He grabbed his phone, wallet, and keys, and stalked out of the flat, unable to be around all of the mementos of his life with Rose, which only served as a reminder to him that he’d destroyed the best thing in his life.

He pulled up to his dad’s flat forty-five minutes later, barely remembering making the drive, and knocked on the door.

“James, mate, what are you doing here?” Robert asked. He then noticed how red James’s eyes were. “James, what happened? Are you all right? Is Rose all right?”

“I fucked up,” he whispered. “I fucked up so badly.”

“Come in,” Robert urged, stepping back to let James in.
As soon as he closed the door behind his son, Robert wrapped James in a hug. James stood still for just a moment before fiercely returning the embrace.

“Shh, breathe, mate,” Robert whispered when he felt how much James was shaking. “Easy does it. Let me make us a cuppa tea, eh?”

James snorted mirthlessly. “Tea’s not gonna cut it. Haven’t got anything stronger, have you?”

Robert pursed his lips, and said, “Sorry, I don’t keep alcohol in the house anymore. Tea is gonna have to cut it. Come on.”

Robert sat a box of biscuits onto the table for James as he fixed up their tea. When they were both cradling a steaming mug in their hands, Robert asked, “Want to tell me what happened?”

“It’s Rose’s birthday,” James said, rubbing his thumb across the lip of his mug. “I just wanted her to have a nice, happy day. But it’s so hard. Because Mum…”

James choked off and lifted his cup to his mouth. He gulped down a large sip, burning his tongue as he tried to compose himself. He set his cup on the table and whispered, “I miss Mum so much.”

He dug his fingers impatiently into his eyes. He was so tired of crying over this. It had been a year, for God’s sake. He should have himself under better control. He should be handling this so much better. No wonder Rose was bloody sick of him. He was sick of himself, too.

“I know, mate,” Robert said gently. “I do, too. But what’s this got to do with Rose?”

“I didn’t want to tell Rose how poorly I was feeling,” James mumbled, blowing on his tea this time before taking a sip. “Because it’s her birthday and she deserves the best day after last year’s disaster of a birthday, so I tried to be normal for her. But of course she knew I wasn’t in the mood, so she asked for a quiet day in together. But how pathetic is that? It’s her birthday, and she was still trying to take care of me!”

“That’s what love is, mate,” Robert said. “Besides, you’ve been working yourself to death in your lab. Rose has hardly had any quality time with you since the school year started, no wonder that’s what she wanted for her birthday.”

“We spend our weekends together!” James protested.

Robert raised an eyebrow. “And how many weekends have you had where neither of you had to work on homework or write papers or anything? When was the last time you had a proper date night with Rose?”

James’s stomach sank as he tried to remember the last time he spent an uninterrupted day with Rose, and guilt crept up on him when he couldn’t think of anything since spring break, when he’d taken a three-day weekend to spend time with her.

“So, you and Rose had a relaxing day in?” Robert prompted, trying to get the full story from his son.

“Yeah,” James sighed. “Well, sort of. I, ehm, well… I sort of kept pushing for us to do something together, like go out and explore the city, or go out to dinner together, but I may have managed to imply that us having a quiet day in together was… boring.”

Frustration swelled up in James as he thought back to how completely and utterly he managed to ruin Rose’s birthday, and he would give anything to rewind the last twelve hours and go back to sitting with Rose on their couch, in their home, watching Netflix together.
“I’m such an idiot,” James moaned, scrubbing his hands across his face. “I should’ve been happy to stay home with her. Because even though I offered, I didn’t feel like doing anything! How rubbish is that of me? What if she’d taken me up on my offer? And all I did was complain while we were out? Jesus, Rose couldn’t’ve won today! I should’ve just fucking told her I wasn’t in the mood to do anything instead of pretending like I was. But I didn’t! I lied to her, even after we’ve promised never to do that! And she hates me and left me and is staying with her mum and I just want her back!”

James’s face crumpled as he remembered how hurt Rose had looked when he’d tried convincing her he was okay. She’d looked so betrayed and, as she had said, so bloody tired.

James rubbed his hands wearily over his face and saw fresh ink on his wrist.

I made it safely to my mum’s.

James rubbed his thumb reverently over the words. He desperately wanted to write her back, and tell her he was so sorry for being such a twat, but he couldn’t bring himself to write anything. He didn’t deserve her; the universe must have gotten it wrong and given her the wrong soulmate. She was destined for so much better than him.

“I don’t know what to do to fix this, Dad,” James whispered. “I hurt her so badly. And I’m still such a fucking mess, even after a year! I should be better now!”

“Time doesn’t erase all grief, James,” Robert said. “Just because you think you should be over something doesn’t mean you are. I’m certainly not over it. I don’t think I ever will be. There isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t miss your mother. But, I also recognized that I’m still struggling with it. So I’ve been going to therapy for it.”

“You have?” James asked, wondering how he didn’t know this.

Robert nodded. “For almost six months now. To help give me better coping mechanisms than eating and drinking my days away. Teaching has certainly helped give me a distraction. But I’m still far from all right.”

“Rose suggested I see a counselor,” James murmured. “But I got angry with her for suggesting I needed help. God, I’m such a twat!”

“I think you should talk to someone,” Robert agreed. “It doesn’t make everything miraculously better. But it helps.”

“I feel like it’s an insult to Rose,” James mumbled. “She’s been so brilliant, and I appreciate everything she’s done for me. But how do I tell her it’s not enough. That I still feel so empty inside?”

“It’s more of an insult that you’re not speaking to someone,” Robert said, reaching over to grab James’s hand. “Rose knows how much you’re suffering. Even I can see it. And it can’t be easy for her to watch, especially when you’re adamantly denying that you’re not okay. And to be brutally honest James, it’s not her responsibility to be your counselor. She isn’t trained for it, and asking that of her isn’t fair. That’s putting so much added stress on her.”

James’s eyes burned when he realized his dad was right. *Fuck, fuck, fuck!*

“What if she doesn’t want to come home?” James whispered, feeling his heart pounding throughout his entire body at the possibility.

“She will,” he assured gently. “She just needed a break. Not from you, but from the situation.”
“I should go home,” James said suddenly. “In case she comes back. I need to be there to apologize.”

“No, mate, you’re not driving anywhere like this,” Robert said firmly, reaching behind him and snagging James’s car keys off the kitchen island. “Driving while this emotionally distraught is like driving drunk. I will not let you drive like this. You can spend the night here.”

James sank back into his seat, knowing his dad was right. He rooted around in his pockets, but didn’t find a pen. He rarely kept one on him anymore, and he wondered why he and Rose had fallen out of the habit of writing to each other regularly.

Thankfully, his dad slid a pen to him across the table before he stood up and gathered their dirty dishes and the untouched box of biscuits.

James uncapped the pen, pushed his sleeve up, and wrote, “I’m glad you made it to Jackie’s. I’m staying with my dad tonight.”

Rose didn’t reply, but before James could work himself into a panic, he glanced at the clock and realized it was nearly midnight. At this time last year, Rose was playing kid games with him to distract him from the worst day of his life. His dad’s, too, and James was suddenly overcome with another swell of grief for his dad. It had been a year since he’d lost his soulmate, and James had been too busy ignoring his own feelings to stop and look at how his dad was coping.

He sighed at himself as he tentatively asked, “So how have you been?”

Robert glanced at James over his shoulders as he filled the sink with hot, soapy water.

“I’m all right,” he said with a shrug. “It’s all meetings and frustrating students and end-of-the-semester panic. The usual.”

“I meant with… y’know…” James gestured vaguely around the flat.

Robert turned back around and shut off the water before he said, “It’s getting better, now that I’m closer to you and Rose, and that I’m back to teaching. But it’s still…”

James nodded and ducked his head down to stare at the grains in the wood of the table as he murmured, “What’s it like—?”

“What’s what like?” Robert prompted when James lapsed into silence.

“Never mind,” James mumbled. “Wasn’t thinking. S’not appropriate.”

“You know you can always ask me anything,” Robert reminded. “No matter how awkward or uncomfortable you think it is. No matter if it’s a hard or hurtful question.”

James inhaled deeply and said in a rush, “What’s it like, losing a soulmate?”

Robert sucked in a sharp breath, and James winced. He shouldn’t’ve bloody asked.

“It’s agony,” Robert said simply, staring at the mug he was washing thoroughly. And without turning around, he murmured, “It’s… It’s like the world has suddenly lost its color, even though I know nothing has changed. Everything is dull. Like watching a film in black and white. You know that the colors must be there, but there’s no way to tell if the character’s clothes are red or blue or green or other. The film is still entertaining, but will always be unsatisfying, because such a huge sensory detail is missing.”
“I’m sorry,” James whispered.

“Yeah,” Robert said quietly. “Me too.” He scrubbed his hands over his face and said, “The guest suite is all ready for you.”

James nodded and stood, mumbling a goodnight to his dad. He walked down the hall to the guest bedroom, where he stripped down to his pants and crawled into bed.

It felt weird to be sleeping without Rose. The room was too quiet without her soft breathing, and the bed felt too cold without her warm body next to him. He moved restlessly as he slipped in and out of a shallow sleep, always expecting his foot to touch Rose as he stretched it out towards her half of the bed, but each time it met with cool sheets, he woke up again.

His eyes burned with exhaustion and frustration. He just wanted to sleep, but apparently he couldn’t even do that without Rose’s help. God, he wished she were here, as selfish as that was. He groaned and rolled over to spoon the pillow that was on Rose’s half of the bed. It was a poor substitute for Rose, and it offered him little comfort, and he hoped to God that sleeping alone wouldn’t become a normal thing, that Rose would somehow find it in herself to forgive him.

He clenched his jaw and buried his face into the fabric of the pillow as tears once more prickled his eyes, making them burn hotter until he was crying silently into the pillow.

James awoke the next morning feeling almost as tired as he had when he went to bed. He contemplated staying in bed for a few more hours to try and get more rest, but decided against it, in favor of heading home as soon as he could to work on making up with Rose.

He dressed quickly and met his dad in the kitchen, where a plate of pancakes and a mug of tea were waiting. James was about to deny the food and just drive home now, but Rose’s voice stopped him when he remembered all of the times she reminded—begged—him to eat.

He sighed and plopped heavily into the chair, saying, “Thanks for breakfast, Dad.”

“Oh course. You need to eat, James, you’re getting skinnier every time I look at you.”

James stabbed a forkful of pancake and shoved it indelicately into his mouth. He should’ve known he couldn’t hide his worsening frame of mind from the two people that knew him best, and he’d been stupid to try.

When he returned to his flat later that morning, James did so with a sense of determination. He had completely ruined Rose’s birthday, despite trying to make it the best day for her, and he set about to fix it as soon as he could.

He wasn’t sure when Rose would be coming home, but she still had classes tomorrow, so she had to be home soon. Right? He ignored the thread of hurt at the possibility that she might stay away for another night in favor of preparing a redux of her birthday dinner. Within ninety minutes, he had a dish of lasagna and bread dough ready to go in the fridge, and a chocolate cake was baking in the oven.

With the food more or less prepared, James grabbed his phone to make a couple necessary and long-overdue phone calls. The first was to Oxford’s counselling center, where he made himself a preliminary appointment for that week. The second was to his research advisor.

“James? It’s Sunday morning. Bloody hell, don’t tell me you’re in the lab again.”

James snorted and said, “No, no. I’m not. And that’s why I’m calling, actually.”
“Is everything all right?”

James sighed and rubbed his finger into his eye.

“I need to take a bit of time off,” he admitted. “Sort out some things. Get some priorities back in order.”

His advisor exhaled and said, “Good on you. We’ve been worried about you, James.”

James cringed. Had he really been that obvious that he wasn’t doing well?

“Yeah, I’ve been told,” he said dryly. “So, can I have some time off?”

“James,” his advisor said seriously, “you’ve pulled almost double the hours of any first-year graduate student. Hell, you could take off the whole summer and still be ahead of others in your year.”

James exhaled in relief. He knew he needed to sort himself out emotionally, but he also knew that if his research fell behind, that would only be another stressor in his life.

“Well, I’m not sure about all summer,” he said. “Perhaps let’s start with until the end of the academic term? That’s two weeks from now. And then I’ll see how things are going.”

“Sounds good,” his advisor said. “And seriously, if you need to take more time, take it. It’s no trouble at all to file for an extended leave, James.”

“Thanks,” James said earnestly, hoping his advisor knew how grateful James was for his laid-back work ethic. “So for now, don’t expect to see me until the end of May?”

“Sounds good. Keep me up to date with how you’re doing, James. I wasn’t kidding when I told you I didn’t want to see you burn out.”

James nodded quietly, even though his advisor couldn’t see him, and murmured, “Yeah. Thanks.”

With the end of that phone call, James felt an enormous weight lift from his shoulders, knowing he wouldn’t have to touch his research project again until he felt truly excited about it once more.

With an energy he hadn’t felt in months, James set about cleaning the flat. He threw away the leftover pizza they’d ordered last night but had let sit on the coffee table; he washed the dishes in the sink; he opened the curtains to get a bit of natural light into the flat, and even cracked open a window to get a bit of fresh air. He vacuumed the floors, finished folding the laundry from last night, and cleaned both the upstairs and downstairs lofts, and by the time he was done, he was exhausted but he felt good about being so productive.

Now, if only he could clean up the mess he’d made of his relationship with Rose as thoroughly as he’d cleaned the flat.

He settled on the couch and turned on a random movie to distract himself from the ticking clock and wondering when Rose might come home.

Turns out, he didn’t have to wait long. The film had barely started when he heard a key in the lock.

He jumped up from the sofa and raced to the front door as it swung open.

“Rose,” he whispered.

She smiled sadly at him, walked into the flat, dropped her bag, and stepped up to wrap her arms
around his neck.

He held her close, whispering frantic apologies into her ear.

“T’m sorry, too,” she whispered.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” he assured.

“Sure I do,” she said. “You were so upset and I just left you here alone. I almost turned around and came right back when I realized what I’d done.”

“It’s okay,” he said. “I understand. You needed a break too. You’ve been so wonderful to me, Rose. You’ve been so strong and loving and I can’t imagine how hard this has all been on you.”

Tears glittered in her eyes and she buried her face in his neck.

“I’ve been so worried about you!” she sobbed, clinging to his jumper. He hugged her closer and squeezed his eyes against his own tears.

“I know. I’m sorry.” He pressed his lips to her temple, now, more than ever, determined to get himself into a better mental and emotional state not just for himself, but for her. “I’m so sorry, love.”

He held her and swayed them from side to side until her snuffles quieted. He pulled back and pressed a lingering kiss to her forehead as he cupped her cheeks and swiped away her tears with his thumbs.

She covered his hands with hers and drew in a shuddering breath before she asked, “How are you today, James?”

“Not good,” he admitted, stroking the apples of her cheeks mindlessly. “But much better than last night. You were right; you’ve always been right, I’m not okay at all, and it was insulting of me to insinuate that I was. I’m so sorry.”

“All I wanted to do was help. It was killing me to see you hurting so much, and I didn’t know how to help you. And you wouldn’t let me help.”

“I know,” he murmured, pecking a quick kiss to her forehead. He inhaled deeply and removed his hands from her cheeks to shove them deep in his pockets. “But I want to be better. For you. And for me. I had a really long chat with my dad last night. I’ve made an appointment with the school’s counselor for Wednesday. And I’m taking a bit of time off from the lab. I was getting to the point where I hated going into work. And I don’t want to feel like that anymore. I want to love what I do again. And most of all, I want to focus on you and on us. I want to be the man you deserve, Rose.”

Rose smiled softly up at him as she reached up to cradle his cheeks and whispered, “You are that man, James. I love you with all that I am.”

He smiled back at her and ducked down in an invitation for a kiss.

Their lips met chastely, a quick press that offered unspoken comfort and reassurances, and it was over far too quickly, in James’s opinion.

“Do I smell chocolate?” Rose asked as she pulled away, looking towards the kitchen.

“Yep! I made you a cake!” James said with a grin as he tugged her towards the kitchen, where her birthday cake stood proudly in its pan on the kitchen bar. “And I’ve got dinner in the fridge. Sort of a do-over for yesterday, if that’s all right? One of these days I’ll get your birthday to be just perfect.”
“It’s always perfect if I can spend it with you,” Rose promised. “Just because we got into a fight doesn’t make my time with you any less special.”

James grinned and couldn’t resist planting another kiss to her lips.

oOoOo

Rose jiggled her knee as she disinterestedly sipped at her mug of tea. James was in his first counseling session, and she was nervous for him. She hoped he would take it seriously, and actually try to talk to the counselor about how he was feeling. And she hoped he would finally get the help he’d needed for a year, and would be able to start putting himself together again.

She pulled her phone out to play a game while she waited for him to come home, but a flash of ink caught her eye.

You know, it’s been ages since we’ve used our soulbond for anything more than a quick “I’ll be there soon” or “I’m running late” or “Good luck on your exam”. I’ve missed having my arms all inked up.

Rose sighed. “Pay attention to your therapy session, James.”

Right. Sorry.

A moment passed, before more ink appeared.

Dr. Greggory suggested it. When I told her that we sort of let that part of our relationship wither once we met. She thought it might be a good place for us to start reconnecting. It’s silly. I see you every day.

Rose cursed and wrote, “No! It’s not silly. Sorry, love, I just thought you might be trying to…”

Rose bit her lip. There was no good way to end that sentence without making him feel poorly about himself and his attention span.

You thought I was trying to ignore the therapy session? It’s all right. I was sort of zoning out for a bit. That’s when she proposed I write to you.

“I’ve missed talking to you like this, too,” Rose admitted. “It’s so personal and intimate, and it’s something that belongs just to us.”

Yeah. And it’s sometimes really hard for me to put into words what I’m thinking. I like this method, and I can try to process my thoughts and emotions before telling you. There’s less pressure.

“Has it been difficult for you to talk to me in person?” she asked, feeling slightly ill at the idea. “Be honest, please.”

He paused for a few long moments before he said, Sometimes.

She felt as though all of the air had been knocked from her lungs.

“Oh, James, I’m so sorry,” she said, feeling tears well up in her eyes. “I never meant for that! I always want you to feel like you can talk to me about anything.”

I know. And most of the time I can. But recently…

Rose sniffled and wiped her eyes and waited patiently for him to continue.

Recently you’ve seemed so angry and sad. And I knew it was my fault. And I was worried about upsetting you further. And I know I went about it all wrong, trying to ignore my problems, but I was so scared that if I tried to tell you how I really felt, you’d get cross with me or you’d start crying, and
I didn’t want either of those to happen, so I tried to make you feel better, but it just made me feel worse, so I tried harder to make myself not feel poorly, but nothing I did seemed to work. I got stuck in that cycle and I didn’t know how to get out of it, so I ignored it, and I wound up hurting us both, and I’m so sorry, Rose.

Rose was full-on crying at this point as she wondered how on Earth she and James had ever gotten to this point.

She managed to pull herself together by the time James got home. He looked drained, but not defeated or agitated.

“I’ve got another appointment at the same time next week,” he announced, plopping down beside her on the sofa.

Rose opened her arm for him and rested her cheek in his hair as he nuzzled into her neck.

“Doctor Greggory had a suggestion,” James said quietly, tracing circles onto her kneecap. “She, ehm, she suggested a conversation between us. About how you’ve been feeling. If you want?”

“I’ve been beyond worried, obviously,” Rose said, staring out their front window as clouds continued to darken the skies. “And I’ve been frustrated. It was like…”

“Like what?” James prompted softly, giving her knee a squeeze. “You can tell me. I want to know.”

Rose sighed. “It was like you didn’t even care that you were hurting me.”

“That’s not true!” James protested, lifting his head from her shoulder so he could look at her.

“But that’s what it felt like,” Rose said, finally meeting his gaze. “I was watching you starve yourself, and go days at a time with only four or five hours of solid sleep. Do you know how terrifying that was? And nothing I did seemed to help, because you insisted you didn’t need any help, so you pushed yourself further. And I didn’t know whether to keep arguing with you or to let you go! Every time I tried to hint that you weren’t okay, you drew further away from me. But if I stopped bringing it up, I felt like I was failing you by not caring that you weren’t okay. I didn’t know what to do, James.”

James felt like he’d been punched in the gut. All these months he’d been hoping to reassure Rose by trying to continue on as normal, and he’d hoped if he just worked hard enough, he could make himself feel better.

“I’m sorry,” he croaked.

“I felt so bloody helpless,” Rose murmured, scrubbing her hands across her face. “And useless.”

“You were far from useless,” James said. “I appreciated everything you did for me, even if I didn’t want to at the time. I’m so sorry I let it get this bad, and I’m sorry I never thanked you for this past year. You have been the best part of the year.”

Rose reached out and cradled the back of his neck in her palm. Her thumb brushed through his hair as she whispered, “You’ve been the best part of my year too.” She leaned forward to press a tender kiss to his forehead. “—We’re still fantastic.” She kissed his right cheek. “—And this year is going to be even better.” She finally slotted her lips over his, sighing at the familiar contact and the warmth and pleasure it brought. “I love you.”
James reclaimed her lips as he wrapped his arms around her to hold her close. He’d missed this so much, the intimacy of merely holding Rose and kissing her. Sure, they shagged fairly regularly, but that wasn’t the same as making love, where they truly became one, body and soul, and let themselves be completely immersed in their love for each other.

As he continued to leisurely kiss Rose, he vowed that he would take his time off to properly be with Rose once more.

And he did. He spent the end of her semester pampering her and cooking for her and helping her study for exams. They hardly left their flat, but James relished the domesticity and quietness of his life.

When James’s two weeks of vacation were up, he filed for an extended leave, effective until the first of July. He spent most of his time with Rose, taking trips with her all across the UK as they reconnected and rekindled the love that had been suffocated over the past few months. And when they weren’t traveling, they were redecorating their flat.

They took a week to repaint their bedroom in shades of dark blue and silver, and on one of the walls, Rose painted a picture of a forest at night in the wintertime. James sat on their canvass-protected bed and watched her work, in awe as she took paint and transformed it into the beautiful picture in her head. The bare branches cast shadows on the rest of the trees around it, and everything was blanketed in a gentle snow while the full moon she was just putting the finishing touches on cast everything in a silvery glow.

“You are so brilliant,” he breathed as she turned back around to face him with a proud smile on her face. Her hair was pulled into a messy ponytail and her face and hands were covered in paint, but she was stunningly beautiful in this moment.

He shimmied off the bed and took her into his arms and pressed a kiss to her lips. Her hands went to his hair, and he knew he probably now had paint in his hair, but he couldn’t bring himself to care as he deepened the kiss. Their hands wandered teasingly across each other’s body as the kiss grew more heated, and later in the shower, they laughed as they worked on scrubbing paint off of each other’s bum.

When the first of July finally rolled around, James found he wasn’t dreading going back to work. He wasn’t as excited as he wanted to be, but he hoped that would change as he dipped his toes back into his research project.

He started out with half days, only staying at the lab for no more than five hours, which gradually lengthened to six, then seven, until by the end of the month, he was spending eight to ten hours in his lab without realizing it.

“I’m so happy to see you happy,” Rose told him on the morning of her first day of classes as they walked hand-in-hand across campus.

“Me too,” he said with a grin, and he pressed a kiss to the back of her hand.

oOoOo

“You’re gonna be brilliant, love,” he wrote as he plopped down in a seat in the huge auditorium.

I hope so. Talk to you after the performance, love.

James spotted her immediately when the stage began immediately filling with the orchestra students, and he smiled proudly at her as she took her seat at the grand piano on the right-hand side of the
stage.

It was the first winter concert for the orchestra ensemble, and Rose had been gripped with nerves for the past week. He’d tried to assure her she would be fine, that she was a wonderful musician, but he suspected it was normal to feel jittery before a first major performance. Hopefully tonight would go well and would bolster her confidence.

James thought the concert went smashingly. From the opening chord to the closing one, he was enraptured by the music, and kept his eyes glued to Rose, marveling at how relaxed and poised she looked behind the piano.

He was gripped with such pride as he stood with the crowd and applauded the orchestra, and his Rose.

He found her after the performance and scooped her up into a hug. She giggled in his ear and clung to him as he spun her around, making the skirt of her dress float around their legs.

“That was beautiful!” he enthused, setting her back on her feet. “Absolutely fantastic!”

“I’m glad you liked it,” Rose laughed, lacing her hand with his as she walked with James to their car.

“Liked it? I loved it! I’m coming to all of these performances.”

Rose grimaced at him. “You don’t have to. You’ll get so bored! It’s the same pieces night after night.”

“There is nothing boring about watching my soulmate doing something she loves,” James corrected, pressing a kiss to her palm as he opened up the car door for her.

True to his word, James was at every single concert, cheering her on from the audience, and on the last performance of the season, he accompanied Rose to the afterparty at the local pub and met all of her orchestra friends. Rose was so pleased to see how well James got along with her friends, and vice versa.

With that final concert came the end of the semester, and another round of exams and stress, which made the reprieve of the winter holidays much more enjoyable.

They celebrated Christmas in the same manner as last year, by eating dinner at Robert’s flat. More family had been invited, and between James, Rose, Jackie, Robert, Mickey, Rita-Anne, the Nobles, and his mother’s parents, the flat had become quite crowded.

“Perhaps next year we can try to go back to Scotland for the holidays?” James suggested to his dad as the two of them loaded the dishwasher.

“Maybe,” Robert said, and then he smiled softly at James. “And maybe we’ll have something else to celebrate then too?”

James’s cheeks flushed red as he bit his lip, the ring he’d bought for Rose seeming to burn a hole in his pocket, where he’d kept it for the last four days.

“Was gonna ask this morning,” James said, brushing his hand across the velvet box. “But it seemed too cliché. I think I’ve got a better idea, though.”

“Well good luck with it, mate,” Robert said, clapping James on the back. “I’ve no doubt she’ll say yes.”
James smiled in gratitude at the confidence, and left the kitchen to join Rose and the rest of the family in the living room, where they were marathoning Christmas films.

oOoOo

James smiled down at Rose as she curled up on her side and hugged his half of the blankets to her chest. She had fallen asleep almost as soon as she was tucked up in bed, a combination of the lateness of the hour, the alcohol they’d consumed, and the New Year’s Eve shag they just finished.

James grinned smugly down at her, his male ego proud that he’d worn her out so thoroughly. It was an excellent way to ring in the new year, if he said so himself.

He pressed a soft kiss to her temple as he reached for his pen. He quietly clicked it open and wrote down a message for her for when she woke up. He saw the ink on the arm that was wrapped around the sheets, and he let out a nervous breath, knowing tomorrow morning couldn’t come soon enough.

“Blanket hog,” he murmured as he carefully worked his half of their blankets out of her grasp. She blearily blinked open her eyes and smiled sluggishly at him before flopping onto her back.

James wriggled into bed beside her before falling asleep himself.

He woke up before she did, and contented himself to watch her. Her hair was mussed and there were pillow creases across her cheek, but she was still the most beautiful person he had ever seen.

“You’re starin’,” Rose mumbled, cracking an eye open and smirked up at him.

He leaned over and pressed a kiss to her cheek.

“You got me,” he said. “Morning, love. Happy anniversary.”

Rose grinned and rolled over to face him.

“Happy anniversary, James,” she replied, reaching out to wrap her hand around his neck to tug him in for a kiss. But a flash of blue ink caught her eye and she pulled back, ignoring his pout to read his message.

*Hello, Happy New Year.* She furrowed her brows; James never wrote anything that generic on her arms, but the words tugged at a distant memory that slipped further away as she tried to grab it.

“Those were the first words I’d ever written to you,” James murmured, resting his forearm next to hers to look at the duplicate message on their arms.

“That’s right,” Rose said, the memory getting clearer. She had woken up on New Year’s Day to those four words on her arms and had run to her mum in fear and confusion.

“Today is my favorite day of the year for so many reasons,” he said, lacing their hands together. “It’s the beginning of a brand new year. A fresh start. And it’s the day I was marked as forever yours.

“And I as yours,” Rose said, tracing her fingertips across his forearm.

“I know that being soulmates is as committed as we can get,” James said, reaching under his pillow for the little velvet box he’d stashed there the night before. “But I was thinking we could maybe have a more visual, traditional representation of our togetherness?”

Rose’s breath hitched when she saw the box, and she squeezed James’s fingers when he flicked it open. The most gorgeous ring Rose had ever seen was nestled inside.
“Marry me, love?” he asked quietly, his heart throbbing in his throat.

“Yes,” Rose said. “God, yes!”

She wrapped her hand around the back of his neck and pulled him in for the kiss that had been aborted a few minutes ago. He hummed into her mouth as their lips moved against each other’s in a familiar and pleasurable dance. He wrapped his hand around her hip and tugged her closer to him as she scratched her fingers lightly through his hair.

Desire pooled low in his belly as she sucked his bottom lip into her mouth and slowly lifted herself to straddle his hips. He groaned in approval and moved his hands to her hips to tug her closer, but was impeded by the little box in his left hand.

He reluctantly broke the kiss and rested his forehead against hers as he panted slightly.

“Shall I put it on you?” he asked excitedly, already taking the ring out of the box.

“Yes, please,” Rose grinned, sitting back on his thighs.

He took her left hand in his and slipped the ring onto her finger.

“James, it’s beautiful,” she breathed, admiring her new ring. The main stone was a sapphire, set elegantly in a small wreath of diamonds. The platinum band twined around the round sapphire like four slender vines, holding the stone in place. Small, leaf-shaped diamonds flanked the center stone in a delicate, floral setting.

“Yeah?” he asked. “You like it?”

“I love it,” she corrected, holding her hand out to inspect her newest piece of jewelry.

James wrapped his arms around her waist and rested his head on her chest. Rose’s fingers absently stroked his hair, making him shiver in pleasure and reminding him of the activity they’d been starting.

He turned his head to press a series of kisses across the swell of her breasts as he dipped his hands beneath her knickers to knead at her bum, reigniting their ready arousal.

He tugged Rose closer into his lap, urging her to grind against him as he worked on divesting them of their shirts. Once their top halves were bare, James tried to think of a way to get their pants off without displacing her from his lap.

He moaned and buried his face into her shoulder as she rubbed against him in a way that sent a particularly potent spark of pleasure through his veins. But then she was gone, and he whimpered as he clung tight to her to keep her in his lap.

Rose laughed softly and said, “This’ll probably feel a bit better if we get our pants off, love.”

“Felt good before,” James mumbled, even as he scrambled on his back to tug his boxer off.

He got them to his ankles and kicked them away before Rose was suddenly on top of him again. He bit his lip as his eyes fluttered shut when she settled herself on his erection. She ground down on him, moaning as she teased them both with her movements.

“Please, love,” James begged, arching up into her. “Let me be inside you.”

Rose shivered at the raw need in his voice, and her hand fumbled between them to line him up. She
sighed in pleasure as she sank down on him, feeling so full.

She rested her hands on his chest as she gave them both a moment to adjust, and James could feel the coolness of the metal band of her ring against his skin. He was gripped with such pride that the woman above him was his. Just as he was hers.

She leaned down and kissed him softly as she started to move on top of him, achingly slowly. He moaned lowly in pleasure as he arched up into her movements, quickly finding her rhythm and matching it. They made love slowly and tenderly and without a care in the world until finally their ecstasy couldn’t be contained and they spiraled into explosive bliss together.

Chapter End Notes

Here is Rose's ring, if you're curious.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Wherein Rose and James enjoy wedded bliss

Chapter Notes

Chapter Rating: Explicit

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rose flopped heavily onto the couch, groaning into her hands as she lay down with her head in James’s lap.

“Still haven’t found a dress?” he asked sympathetically, stroking his fingers through her hair.

“I found a few styles I liked, but Mum, of course, hated them,” she sighed, leaning into his touch. “She’s driving me barmy.”

“I’m sorry.”

Rose hummed in agreement, and closed her eyes, letting James’s fingers soothe away the stress of the day.

“You know, you can tell Jackie to back off a bit,” he mused, stroking his thumb back and forth across one of her eyebrows. “I mean, it’s your wedding, not hers.”

“I know,” Rose mumbled. “But I don’t want her to hate everything about it. Which it seems like she does.”

Rose sighed against the memories of the last several months, where her mother had given her blunt opinions about every aspect of the wedding. “Do you really want a December wedding? ... Are you sure that’s the color palette you want to go with? ... I’m sure your friends are wonderful, but wouldn’t you rather hire a professional photographer? ... Oh, Rose, you don’t want that plain old dress, now do you? ...”

“I can speak to her, if you’d like,” James offered. “Or I’ll come with you dress shopping. Just you and me, and we’ll find the most beautiful dress on Earth.”

“You’re not allowed to see the dress until the wedding day,” Rose said monotonously, repeating what Jackie had told her when Rose suggested she show a few of the dresses to James to get his opinion. “It’s tradition.”

“Tradition shmadition,” James scoffed. “I want you to actually enjoy our wedding, love. I don’t care if we don’t go about it the traditional way. I want you to be happy, and your mum isn’t exactly doing that for you.”
“I’ll be fine once I pick a bloody dress,” Rose said, hoping that would be the case.

James nodded and leaned down to press a kiss to her forehead.

“Why don’t you go run yourself a bath,” James suggested. “Destress a little bit.”

“I bet I’d destress better if you joined me,” she teased, turning her head to press a kiss to his upper thigh.

His stomach swooped and his Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat.

“Right,” he squeaked. “Yep. Excellent plan. Let’s relax together. You run the bath, I’ll grab some wine?”

“It’s a date,” Rose purred, pressing another kiss to his hip before she sat up and walked away.

James blinked after her, before he stood up and rushed to the kitchen, but not before he sent a rather lengthy text to his soon-to-be mother-in-law.

oOoOo

James clasped Rose’s hand in his as he tugged her into the fourth jewelry store on their list, pleased when she rested her head on his shoulder and squeezed his fingers. This was what wedding shopping should be like; just him and her, and no stress or anxiety.

They were shopping for their wedding bands, and they had a few rings already on the ‘maybe’ list. So far, their favorite had been a simple platinum band with beveled edges and a brushed finish. Simple, but perfect for what they needed.

However, as soon as they stepped into the shop, James’s gaze was drawn to a pair of rings in a corner display.

“Rose, look at these!” he called, pulling her from where she was chatting with an employee in the store.

She skipped up to him, and her hitched breath made him hopeful that she, too, loved these rings.

The shop attendant immediately opened up the case and gave James and Rose the rings to inspect. Rose slid it onto her finger, humming appreciatively at the way it matched her engagement ring. The platinum wedding band was designed in a weaving pattern that seemed to perfectly complement her ring.

“Oh, it’s perfect!” Rose gushed, looking over to James.

He grinned brightly at her and asked, “So, are these the ones?”

“I think so.”

They made quick work of ordering the rings, getting them sized, and giving the shop the engravings they each wanted—their names and the date of their wedding.

“I just want it to be December thirtieth already!” Rose moaned as she walked out of the shop with James.

“Me too,” James lamented, swinging their joined hands lightly between them.
With the rings picked out, and Rose’s wedding dress finally decided on soon thereafter, they were getting more impatient for their wedding day. When they weren’t busy with school work, most of their time was spent running across the country, finalizing the details. They finalized the bridesmaids’ dresses and the groomsmen’s tuxes; they finished up the guest list and sent out the invitations; they confirmed the venue, decorations, catering, and officiant; and together, they set about booking their honeymoon, which James was having a hard time with. With his thesis defense scheduled for only five months after their wedding, he had very little time to spend on a honeymoon because he needed to get back to work writing his dissertation.

“I feel so awful!” he groaned. “This is the happiest, most romantic moment of our lives, but, oh, sorry, I can only spare a week of my time to it!”

Rose frowned at her fiancé as he scrubbed his hands across his face in frustration.

“James, I know you’re going to be busy when we get back, and that’s okay,” Rose soothed.

“I can push back the date,” James said. “I’ll call my advisor and tell him I’ll defend next autumn.”

“Don’t you dare! You’ve been working so hard on your project, and I won’t let anything ruin this for you.”

“But I don’t want to ruin our wedding!” James argued miserably. “I’ve ruined enough of our relationship as is.”

“James McCrimmon, don’t you dare say that,” Rose said fiercely, tugging his hands away from his face to glare at him. “Our relationship has been better than I could ever have dreamed of, and I’ll not let you make little of anything we’ve done together.”

Remorse pinched his face, and he squeezed her fingers in apology.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I just… I want to give you the honeymoon of a lifetime.”

“And it will be,” she soothed, stroking his hair away from his face.

James sighed and let himself be pulled against her chest. He took his laptop from the coffee table and set it in Rose’s lap to continue perusing honeymoon options.

“How does skiing in the French Alps sound?” he asked, pulling up the resort’s webpage.

“Beautiful,” Rose said, absently petting his hair as she scrolled through the information. “Never been skiing.”

“It’s loads of fun. Mum and Dad used to take me on vacations to Colorado to ski. I think you’ll love it. You don’t mind a cold honeymoon, do you? I mean, we could look into something more tropical. Or a cruise?”

“Skiing sounds perfect,” she assured. “Is that what you want to do?”

“Well, I’d rather be able to take an extended honeymoon with you…” He trailed off for a moment, before he grinned up at her. “Tell you what. We’ll take a short honeymoon right after our wedding. But how about over the summer when we’re graduated, we take an extended vacation together? Bit of a second honeymoon?”

“James, I’m honestly perfectly content with skiing in France with you for our honeymoon,” she said earnestly.
“But what if I’m not? What if I want to travel the world with my soulmate for a few months?”

*Travelling the world...* Rose bit her lip. Ever since she was small, she’d wanted to travel the world. She was often envious of James and his parents about how often they could travel.

“Yeah,” Rose whispered, a slow smile lighting up her face. “Yeah, that sounds perfect.”

James hummed low in his throat as he reached up to tug her in for an enthusiastic kiss.

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For once, the end of the academic semester brought with it minimal anxiety. After her final exams were done, Rose felt nothing but excitement and giddiness for her impending nuptials. When she and James called to confirm everything was still happening on schedule, how could they be at all nervous or stressed over the happiest moment of their lives?

With a little over a week to go before the wedding, Rose’s dress and James’s tuxedo were both delivered to the McCrimmon manor in Scotland. Rose hid her dress in the guest suite, despite James’s pout that it couldn’t hurt for him to get a tiny little peek at her dress.

“Nuh uh,” Rose chastised. “You’re getting the full effect on our wedding day.”

The combination of the holidays and the upcoming wedding meant that the house was bursting with people. James enjoyed spending a proper Christmas holiday in Scotland again, after two years of having a quieter dinner in Oxford.

The morning after Christmas, Rose awoke when she felt James curl himself around her. She cuddled into him, content to drift back to sleep, but the tense line of his body and the way he buried his face in her hair put all thoughts of sleep out of her mind. She covered his hand with hers and gave his arm a squeeze in hers.

“Wanna talk about it?” she murmured softly.

James was silent for a few long moments before he asked, “Do you know the theory of parallel universes?”

“Only what I’ve learned from watching sci-fi films with you,” Rose answered, rotating in his arms so she could look at him.

“It’s basically the idea that there are an infinite number of universes, all stacked against each other, and they all stem from the various choices we make,” he explained. “Do you ever wonder what our lives would be like if soulbonds didn’t exist?”

“I try not to,” Rose answered grimly.

“Yeah,” he murmured, and the melancholy in his voice tugged at her heart. “Me either. But there have to be universes where people aren’t soulmated, right. That’s just basic statistics. So what are parallel you and parallel me doing in those worlds? Eh? Because if we’re not soulmated, we probably never meet or fall in love or anything!”

“James, love, don’t do this to yourself,” Rose said gently, pressing a kiss to his chest.

“That was my dream. You didn’t exist, and soulmates didn’t exist, and dream me didn’t realize anything was amiss, only that he felt like something was missing.” He wrapped his arm tighter around her waist and buried his nose in her hair. “I just… what’s parallel me doing without parallel
you?” he asked miserably. “Is he dating someone? Or married? No woman—or man—could possibly compare to you. Does he have this feeling deep inside that his life is somehow empty or lacking, but he doesn’t know why, and it’s all because you aren’t in it?”

He sounded so genuinely concerned and distraught, and Rose was desperate to wipe that look off his face.

“D’you know what I think?” Rose whispered, running her fingers through his hair as she tugged gently to urge him to look at her. When his bloodshot gaze finally met hers, she continued, “I think the magic of the soulbond transcends universes. No matter what, or how, or when, or for how long, you and I still meet each other. I think that’s what being soulmated is all about; we’re each other’s perfect match, and even in universes where we aren’t formally matched, we’ll still find each other, no matter what.”

James sniffled, and offered a tentative smile to Rose.

“Yeah,” he whispered, leaning towards her to press a grateful kiss to her lips. “Yeah, I think I like that.”

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James rested his hand on his mum’s waist as he slowly walked them across the dance floor. He glanced over his mother’s head to find his bride, who was twirling happily in the arms of his dad. She caught his eye and grinned, which he couldn’t help but return, before he gave his attention back to his mother.

“I’m so happy for you,” she whispered, looping her arms around his neck in a hug as the song drew to a close.

James beamed at her and accepted her hug, feeling as though his heart was about to burst with the sheer happiness it contained.

“Time to give you back to Rose, now,” his mum said. She stretched up and kissed his cheek. “I love you, Jamie.”

“Love you, too, Mum,” he said, turning his head to kiss her cheek in return.

He looked over at his dad, who was pressing a parting kiss to Rose’s brow before handing her off to James and turning to his own wife.

James beamed at Rose, holding her in his arms, as his parents did the same with each other. His dad leaned down and caught his mum’s lips in a kiss, and James sighed happily as he watched his parents dance away together.

James woke up slowly, still basking in the warmth and giddiness from his dream. He rolled over to spoon his wife…

And was met with cool sheets.

He blinked quickly, trying to get the dim room in focus, and when he saw his empty bed in his room in Scotland, he remembered the wedding hadn’t happened yet. It was today.

His heart dropped low in his stomach and his eyes burned. His wedding was today and his mum wouldn’t be there.
And Rose wasn’t even here to make him feel better.

He scrambled for his pen, needing to feel close to Rose even though she was probably still asleep.

“Good morning, my almost-wife!”

To his surprise, she replied immediately.

*Good morning, my almost-husband! Why are you up so early?*

James smirked. “Pot, kettle. Why are you up so early?”

*Got hair and makeup appointments and whatnot soon. It takes a lot of work to be this beautiful.*

“Oh, come off it,” James scoffed. “You’re beautiful no matter what.”

*Flatterer xoxo. Really though. You okay?*

“Yes. I’m just missing my mum a lot today.”

*I’m sorry, James.*

“Me too. So what’s your schedule for the day.”

*Well, I’m getting married at noontime. But we just finished breakfast. I’m about to go in for hair and makeup soon. I don’t really know; I’m going wherever my mum tells me to go.*

“That sounds like the best plan.” James sighed, and glanced at the clock. It was still too early for him to begin any of the day’s preparations, but it couldn’t hurt to shower. “I’m gonna hop in the shower. Talk to you in a little bit, love. By the way, I cannot wait to be married to you.”

*I can’t wait either. I’ll see you at the altar. Love you.*

James smiled at his arm, and climbed out of bed, ready to start his wedding day.

Meanwhile, across town, Rose’s cosmetic preparations were already underway.

“Surely it doesn’t take five hours to get ready!” Rose whined, nearly falling asleep as she had her hair and makeup done.

“Oh, quit your moping,” Jackie said from where she was getting her own hair and makeup done. “These things take longer than you think. You’ll be glad to have the extra time. Besides, we’re scheduled to do a few photos of the bridesmaids outside the church before the service. And getting into a wedding dress without mucking up your hair will take a bit of time. And for God’s sake, would you stop getting ink on your arm?! It’s gonna smear on your dress! And you’ll be able to see it through the sleeve!”

“Who cares? We’re soulmates. No one is going to be surprised to see us with ink on our arms!”

“Still, you don’t want to ruin your dress,” Jackie harrumphed.

Rose rolled her eyes and looked back down to her arms. She wasn’t getting into her dress for a while yet; she could still chat with James for a little bit longer.

oOoOo
Rose had to admit that the next five hours passed unbelievably quickly, and soon she was standing in front of the full-length mirror, double and triple checking her appearance and the way her gown was draped over her figure. She was utterly in love with her dress and the way the delicate lace skirt flowed around the satin sheath beneath. She was confident James would be absolutely speechless when he saw her.

A knock on the door made her frown. She had just sent her mum to go check on James, and to give him the wedding gift she’d bought him—a pair of cuff links engraved with their names on one and the date on the other.

“Are you decent, darling?”

“Yep, come in, Dad.”

Robert walked in and a slow grin lit up his face when he saw her.

“You look beautiful,” he said.

“Thanks!”

“And I come bearing gifts,” he said, pulling two jewelry boxes from his pockets.

Rose furrowed her brows. James had told her earlier in the month that he was giving her a necklace so she wouldn’t have to go out and buy one, but what could the other gift be?

“This one’s from James,” Robert said, holding out the larger box.

Rose took it, eager to see the necklace he had gotten her. She flicked open the box and gasped: a ruby and sapphire gem sat nestled within the loops of a platinum infinity symbol.

“Oh, this is gorgeous,” she breathed, carefully taking the necklace out of its velvet bedding. Her fingers trembled as she undid the clasp, but soon the necklace was taken from her hands.

“Allow me,” Robert suggested, stepping behind her as he draped the necklace over her neck.

Rose touched the pendent reverently, admiring the way it looked against her skin, and appreciating that James managed to pick a piece of jewelry that matched their wedding’s palette.

“Something new and something blue,” Robert murmured, straightening the necklace for her.

“Something borrowed.” He touched his fingers to the hair clip that had belonged to her Nan. “How about something old?”

He handed her the other velvet box, and Rose took it curiously. She opened it to reveal a pair of beautiful diamond earrings. She picked one of them up, letting it dangle between her fingers. Four small, round diamonds were stacked in a line that led down to a large, tear-drop diamond. They were classically beautiful, and Rose immediately removed the small diamond studs from her ears.

“These belonged to my wife,” Robert said with a small smile once Rose fastened them to her ears. "She wore them to our wedding. Before her, they belonged to her mother, and so on."

Rose’s stomach coiled with regret, and she touched the jewelry.

“She would’ve been so proud of you and James,” Robert said wistfully. “She would’ve loved to have seen this day. But alas. I like to think she’s watching us anyway and will be with us today.”

Rose blinked back the moisture in her eyes.
“I-I didn’t realize you were religious,” Rose admitted.

Robert smiled softly. “Well, perhaps more spiritual than religious. And I have hope that I’ll be seeing my wife again one day. That hope is what keeps me going—it’s what keeps everyone going, really. When my time comes, I’ll be with her once more, and we can truly begin our forever anew.”

Tears were trickling down Rose’s cheeks, and she dabbed at her eyes with tissue.

“Sorry, darling. This is a happy day. Best not dwell in the sadness.”

“It’s both,” Rose said, double checking her makeup in the mirror. “It’s the happiest day of my life, but it’s bittersweet because my dad isn’t here to see it, neither is Vera. I know James feels the same way.”

Robert nodded and enveloped Rose into a cautious hug, mindful of her dress and hair.

She pulled back from the embrace and took another moment to admire her reflection before she carefully rolled up her sleeve and grabbed a pen.

“Thank you for my necklace,” she wrote, smirking when she thought of her mum. If Jackie was here, she would pitch a fit to see Rose smearing her arm with ink just minutes before the ceremony. “It’s beautiful.”

*I’m glad you like it! Thanks for the cuff links! They’re perfect.*

“I’ll see you in a few minutes, my love,” Rose wrote.

*Can’t wait!* 

She glanced at the clock, wanting to say sod the schedule and just burst into the church regardless, but she instead settled for pacing restlessly as Robert chuckled off to the side.

Finally—finally!—it was her time to enter the chapel. Rose clung to Robert’s arm as her bridesmaids disappeared into the church. This was it…

“Our turn, darling,” Robert murmured, covering her hand with his. “Ready?”

She nodded fiercely, so ready to be married to her soulmate.

She heard the music start up, and the chapel doors opened, and all heads turned to face her as she and Robert started their slow walk down the aisle. She hardly saw the crowd though, not when she spotted James at the altar, flanked on either side by his groomsmen and her bridesmaids. The view was striking; the groomsmen were all in slate blue tuxes with burgundy ties, while the bridesmaids were in burgundy dresses with navy blue shawls. And standing between them was her soulmate, smartly dressed in a black tux and a black bow tie that he was fiddling with.

God, he was beautiful, and his tuxedo was certainly flattering to his figure. He caught her gaze and a huge grin split his face as he started bouncing on the balls of his toes. Rose giggled at his excitement, and she felt tears of utter happiness prickling her eyes and she had to fight to not race up to him and into his arms.

She felt as though she were floating, like her body was weightless with joy that could not be contained. She barely noticed what was happening, but suddenly she was standing in front of James, and her mother, too. People were speaking, and both Jackie and Robert pressed a kiss to her cheeks before they took her hands and gave them to James.
“You look stunning,” James murmured quietly, even though the minister had started speaking.

He reached out and swiped his thumb at the corner of her eye, catching the tears that had gathered there.

The service passed in a blur of music and readings, and finally it was time for them to give their vows.

“Y’know,” James began, rubbing his thumbs across the backs of her fingers, “a really wise, and beautiful, and perfect, and—” Rose rolled her eyes at him, and he shot her a wink. “—and wonderful woman once told me that she has a theory about soulmates, and what it means to be soulmated. She told me that the soulbond transcends universes. There are an infinite number of parallel universes, and an infinite number of yous and mes. An infinite number of us-es. And no matter what universe we’re in, you and I are still together, because there is honestly nobody else that could be more perfectly matched to me than you are. You are the best part of my life, and have been ever since I was eleven years old. I promise to love and cherish and support you every minute of every day for the rest of our lives. And I, for one, am so happy to live in this universe with you.”

Rose sniffled against her tears as she squeezed his hands.

“Dunno how I’ll top that,” she whispered. “I should be on ten percent for that, y’know.”

The crowd chuckled as James smiled down at her, and oh, was it time for her to kiss him yet?

“S’pose I’ll just borrow from you,” she teased. “You’ve been the best part of my life since I was five. I barely knew how to read or write, and suddenly there you were. You became my best friend within the course of a day, and our love grows stronger every day, even though it feels like I couldn’t possibly love you anymore than I already do. I can barely remember my life before you, and for that, I’m sort of glad, because I don’t want to know a life without you.” Tears clogged her throat when she saw James’s eyes shimmering with moisture. She squeezed his hands and managed to choke out, “I love you more than anything, and I promise to continue loving you unconditionally and eternally. I promise to support you in all that you do, and I promise to stay with you forever and beyond.”

James blinked and a tear dripped from his eyelashes. She reached up and cradled his cheeks, brushing her thumbs under his eyes as he reached up to cover her hands with his.

Finally, it was time for them to exchange rings. James’s young cousin walked up holding a cushion on which their wedding bands sat. Rose glanced at them, as in love with them as she was when she and James first picked them out.

James took her band from the pillow, and started speaking.

“Rose, you are the love of my life, and you are my very best friend.” He slipped the cool metal of her wedding band onto her finger, and brought her knuckles to his lips for a quick kiss. “With this ring, I marry you and bind my life to yours. It is a symbol of my eternal love, my everlasting friendship, and the promise of all my tomorrows.”

Rose’s fingers trembled as she took James’s wedding band from the velvet cushion.

“James, you are the love of my life, and you are my very best friend.” Rose caressed his knuckles reverently as she slid his matching wedding band onto his finger. “With this ring, I marry you and bind my life to yours. It is a symbol of my eternal love, my everlasting friendship, and the promise of all my tomorrows.”

Rose was vaguely aware that the minister was speaking again, so caught up in the feel of James’s
hands in hers, and on the weight of her new ring, glittering beside her engagement ring. She suddenly heard the word ‘kiss’, and not a moment too soon, in her opinion, because she was about to yank her soulmate down for a snog, regardless of propriety.

James leaned down towards her as she angled her face up, and their lips met in a soft press of a kiss. She tasted the salt from their tears, and she giggled into the kiss, feeling him do the same as his hands moved to cup her cheeks.

The sound of applause pulled them from the moment, and Rose reluctantly pulled away from her husband. Her husband! God, she loved the sound of that, and she beamed up at him. He was smiling softly down at her, and her heart stuttered at the naked love shining in his eyes.

“I love you, my wife,” he murmured, and her belly flipped in elation at those words coming from his lips.

“As I love you, my husband,” she replied, leaning up to catch his lips in hers once more.

The next hour passed in a blur of photographs with James and the rest of their wedding party. The outdoor photos got quite cold quite quickly. Though her dress had sleeves, they were made of sheer lace, and it offered little protection from the December chill. James, however, saw it as an excuse to keep her wrapped in his arms, and Rose couldn’t find it in her to complain.

They were soon shuffled to the hotel for the reception party where they were swept up by many congratulatory guests as the luncheon spread was laid out for the guests.

James guided Rose to the head table and tugged out her chair for her before scooting his seat as close to her as possible. He kept his arm around her as they devoured their food, famished from the excitement of the day, and he stole as many kisses as she could as the toasts started.

He felt so happy and warm that all of their friends and family could celebrate this happy day with them, but he was impatient for the toasts to end so he could get to one of his favorite wedding traditions: the bride and groom’s first dance.

He tugged her to her feet when they were prompted to step onto the dance floor as the first chords of “Grow Old with Me” began.

Rose tucked her head against his chest as he started to dance them across the room, unaware of the soft coos of approval from their guests. How could he be focused on anything other than the feel of his wife in his arms?

He rubbed his fingers against her dress, feeling how the lace slipped across the satin beneath.

“Do you know what I thought when I first saw you?” he whispered in her ear. “I thought you looked like one of those Greek goddesses in the stories, come down from Olympus to mingle with the commoners.” He sighed and pulled her closer. “How did I get so lucky to have a goddess for a soulmate?”

Rose smiled up at him through the tears in her eyes. He bent down and caught her lips in a sweet kiss. The dopamine and serotonin flooding through his body made the kiss seem more pleasurable than any other kiss they had shared, and he wanted so badly to ditch the rest of the reception so he could take Rose to their hotel suite and make sweet love to her all night long.

“I love you,” he said raggedly, pulling back from the kiss before it turned into a heated snog to be witnessed by all of their friends and family.
“As I love you,” she murmured, running her thumb across his bottom lip.

He hummed happily and tugged her snugly to him as they finished up their first dance as husband and wife.

The afternoon passed blessedly quickly as James and Rose seemed to dance with every guest in attendance, and with each other. The party finally started winding down around late afternoon, and James and Rose took their leave of the reception to make the short trip upstairs to their suite for the night.

They said a hasty goodbye to their friends and family as they ran together through the hallways of the hotel and to the lift.

As soon as the lift doors closed around them, James’s fingers were all over Rose’s skin.

“You looked so beautiful today, love,” he murmured, latching his lips onto the skin of her neck. “You’re the most beautiful bride there’s ever been. And you’re all mine.

A soft sigh escaped Rose’s lips as she tilted her head to the side to give him better access.

“You were pretty handsome too,” Rose said, spinning in his embrace to face him.

He leaned down to reclaim the skin that was just beginning to pinken in a love-bite, but Rose covered his lips with her fingertips, and pressed a quick kiss to his cheek.

“We should wait until we get to our room,” she said regretfully as she felt him pout against her fingertips.

Fortunately, the doors dinged open a moment later, and James nipped at her fingers that were still covering his mouth before he took her hand and tugged them to their suite.

He spared a cursory glance around the room, but he was more focused on his wife. His wife! His heart fluttered happily at those two words, and he turned and pinned her against the door to reclaim her mouth. Her lips parted automatically for him, and her hands buried themselves into his hair.

His hands, meanwhile, trailed across her collarbone before his fingers dipped beneath the fabric to tease her breasts. She gasped into his mouth and his fingers tightened in his hair as his fingertip managed to brush across her nipple.

“God, you’re so gorgeous,” he groaned, pinning her hips with his as he rubbed his growing erection against her. “This dress is so gorgeous. And if you want to keep it in one piece, help me get it off you.”

“Impatient are we?” Rose teased, resting her hands on his chest and scratching, delighting in his shudder.

“Can you blame a man for wanting to make love with his new wife?”

Rose grinned against his lips, and pressed a parting kiss to them before she broke away from him. James guided her to the bedroom, where they both worked on disrobing each other. It was slow work made slower by the rogue touches and kisses they pressed to each other’s skin as it was revealed to the other’s gaze, and by the time they were left standing in only their underwear, they were both aching with arousal.

“This set is lovely,” James rasped, running his finger reverently across her lacy, white strapless bra
and matching knickers.

“If you think these are sexy,” Rose breathed as he unclasped her bra, “just wait until you see what I packed for the honeymoon.”

James’s belly coiled in anticipation, and he could hardly get their pants off fast enough before walking her backwards to their bed. He crawled onto the mattress after her, admiring the sight of his wife spread bare before him. There was no one in the universe more perfect than her, and he was so proud and thankful that this was his life.

He slowly climbed up her body, pressing teasing kisses and bites across every inch of her skin. He’d barely started nibbling on her hips when she started squirming. She sat up and tugged on his shoulders, forcing him up.

“Enough teasing,” she growled, reaching down to give his erection a firm stroke.

He shuddered out a moan and clenched his hands into fists in their sheets.

“Make love to me,” she whispered. She continued to stroke him slowly as she reclined back against the pillows, and she let her thighs fall open to cradle him between her hips.

James tugged her hand away from his cock as he lined himself up. He leaned forward and caught her lips between his as he slowly let himself slip inside her. Her mouth went lax against his as she whined her pleasure.

He bit his lip and shivered at the feel of her surrounding every inch of him.

“Oh, Rose,” he moaned, pulling out part way before thrusting into her again. “I love you so much.”

“Love you, too,” she sighed, her nails biting into his back on every thrust forward.

“Today was absolutely perfect,” he said, dropping his head to her collarbone. He pressed long kisses to her neck and shoulder as his hand wandered between them to rub at her clit. She arched her hips into his and clenched tight around him, and James squeezed his eyes against the overwhelming pleasure.

“Yeah,” Rose agreed breathlessly, arching into him as a band of heat and need was pulled taut low in her belly. “Oh, God, James. Feels good. You feel so good.”

James grunted wordlessly into her neck, his brain shorting out and refusing to make coherent sentences. His hand rubbed her clit more quickly and firmly as he tried to send her into orgasm before him. He moaned in relief when her legs tightened around his hips as her muscles quivered around him. Her nails scraped down his back as she began crying his name, and he finally let himself tumble into his pleasure after her.

Several minutes later, they were curled up against each other, naked and breathing heavily as their hearts slowed.

“That was so brilliant,” James mumbled as he tugged the duvet up over them as their overheated bodies started to cool.

“Mhm,” she sighed and wrapped her fingers around his hand.

Metal brushed against her palm, and she lifted his hand to inspect his new ring. A thrill of possessiveness shot through her when she saw his ring. James’s chest rumbled as he chuckled behind
her and nuzzled his face into her neck.

“Feels a little surreal,” he whispered, holding his hand up so he could see his wedding band too.

Rose lifted her arm so her left hand was hovering beside his, and she admired their matched rings, and the way their arms reflected their words from this morning. The ink was a little smudged from the day’s events, but the conversation was still easily discernible, and Rose didn’t think she would ever get used to seeing the evidence of their soulbond laid out side by side as it was in that moment.

They awoke early the next morning to catch a flight to Chamonix ski resort in France. They’d tidied up the room and left Rose’s wedding dress and James’s tux in the front room, knowing Robert and Jackie would be by later that morning to collect and preserve the garments.

Their week-long honeymoon passed far too quickly for either of their liking, but they knew a longer vacation was in store for them that summer. They crammed their days with ski dates and trips into the small towns surrounding the resort, and their nights with intimacy and warming up together in the spacious tub in their suite. They’d made love plenty of times before they’d been married, but they were still riding the high of their wedding, and every touch of their skin sent bolts of electricity and desire deep inside of them.

On the last day of their honeymoon, James awoke Rose early so they could catch a train to Paris.

“You don’t think I would let us honeymoon in France without taking us to one of the top romance capitals in the world, do you?” James asked dryly when he saw Rose’s excitement.

They explored the capital city all day, hitting as many major monuments and museums as they could, before James took them to dinner in the city.

“Did you have a nice trip, love?” he asked, swirling his wine around in his glass as they waited for their dessert.

“I did,” she confirmed, reaching out to touch her toes to his shin. “Did you.”

“Absolutely. I can’t believe we’ve got to go home tomorrow,” he lamented.

“I know, but the sooner we get back, the sooner our semesters will be finished, and the sooner we can get back to travelling.”

The end of their honeymoon signaled the end of their reprieve from school and obligations. They were both due to graduate at the end of the semester. For Rose, that meant the stress of passing her final semester and figuring out what she wanted to do with her degree. For James, it meant the stress of writing and defending his thesis paper, and figuring out what he wanted to do with his degree.

But despite their busy schedules, they made sure they had at least one date night a week, even if it was something as simple as watching Netflix and eating takeaway.

Spring break brought a much-needed rest for Rose, but James was still working tirelessly on his thesis. And he was also submitting applications to nearby universities for a teaching position for the next autumn.

“This is driving me barmy,” James groaned to Rose one night as he collapsed into their bed. “All of these job applications are contingent on me actually passing my thesis defense. No pressure or anything.”
“James, I have the utmost confidence in you,” Rose said from the en suite where she was washing her face.

He hummed unconvincingly. “If not, I guess you’ll be supporting me in this relationship from now on, eh?”

He grinned at her, still so proud of her for having gotten a job offer at a local photography shop in town.

“Well, it’s about time I pull my weight, isn’t it?” she teased, folding back the covers so she could slip into bed beside him.

James rolled next to her the moment she was settled. He nuzzled his nose into her neck and murmured, “Quite right, too.”

“Good thing I didn’t marry you for your money,” she sighed, tilting her head back as he kissed his way across her collarbone.

“It was my devastating good looks, wasn’t it?”

“Well…”

James growled and nipped at her neck for her cheek, delighting in her giggles as he crawled on top of her.

Thankfully, all of James’s applications and interviews paid off; he was given offers from three of the schools he had applied to, and he decided on Exeter College, which was only a few miles away from their flat, so they wouldn’t have the added stress of finding a new home and moving.

Now that their futures were more or less determined, they were both eager to finish up their degrees. James worked diligently on his thesis, editing it and re-editing it and presenting it to his advisor to make his project as strong as possible.

Rose, meanwhile was wrapping up all of her final projects and papers, glad that she had no final exams to take this semester. When she submitted the last paper of her uni career, she felt a huge weight lift from her shoulders. Assuming she didn’t make any egregious errors in any of her projects, she would be graduating in a week’s time.

She was. James had been right all of those times he’d told her that uni graduations were boring. She slouched in her hard, uncomfortable seat and rolled up the sleeve of her robe to pass the time chatting with James as she waited to be awarded her degree.

The ceremony finally ended, and she was eager to find James. She scoured the room for him as she jotted down a note on her arm asking where he was, when she suddenly heard his voice.

“Congratulations, my love!” he yelled, jogging up to her to sweep her into a hug. Her gown fluttered around their legs as she hung on for dear life, stifling her grin into his shoulder. “I’m so proud of you, Rose. So proud!”

“Oi, put her down so I can have a turn!”

Rose laughed when she saw her mum swat James across the back of his head. He pouted and put her back on her feet, but not before tugging her in for a quick kiss.
The excitement of Rose’s graduation barely passed before the excitement and anticipation of James’s came up on them.

Rose sat in the audience with Robert and several other students and faculty at Oxford. Even from her seat in the audience, Rose could see how nervous James looked.

She checked the time, and upon seeing that he still had ten minutes before his presentation was to start, Rose stood up and walked up to the front of the room.

James didn’t see her at first, pacing as he was, and muttering to himself.

“Hey,” she murmured, reaching out to touch his arm.

He jumped.

“You all right?” she asked, tugging him to stand in front of her so she could fix his hair and his tie.

She felt his muscles relax under her touch, and he exhaled raggedly.

“I’m a little anxious,” he admitted, scrubbing his hand across the back of his neck. “I feel like everything is riding on the outcome of today, y’know. My job next autumn. Our summer vacation. My pride…”

“You’ll be fine,” Rose soothed, placing her hands on his chest, where she could feel his heart beating rapidly. “I’ll be right out there. So’s Dad. Just talk to us. Talk to me. And you’ll be done in about an hour.”

James bobbed his head in agreement as he took her hands from his chest and pressed his lips to her fingers.

“Thanks, love,” he whispered raggedly.

“Sorry, Rose, but we’re about to start. If you could take your seat.”

Rose glanced over her shoulder at James’s research advisor. She nodded, and turned back to her husband. She stretched up on her tiptoes and brushed a soothing kiss to his lips.

“I’ll see you after,” she promised, giving his fingers a squeeze. “You’ve got this, James.”

He nodded wordlessly, and Rose turned away from him. She shuddered out a breath as she walked back to Robert and sat down heavily next to him.

“He’ll be fine,” Robert assured, wrapping his arm around her in a hug.

“I know he will be,” Rose said confidently. “But I hate seeing him so nervous.”

“Once he gets going, he’ll be fine,” Robert said. “It’s how it always goes. You get so immersed in explaining the project you’ve devoted the last three or so years of your life to, and it’s hard to be anything but confident.”

Rose nodded and dropped her hands to her lap as James’s advisor introduced him.

James caught her eye as soon as it was his turn to start presenting, and Rose flashed him a grin and a thumbs-up, relieved when he smiled back. He took in a deep breath, and Rose could visibly see the tension leave his shoulders.
She, on the other hand, was on the edge of her seat for the entire hour of his presentation. She had no idea what he was talking about most of the time, but he seemed calm and poised, so Rose took that to mean he was doing all right. And at the end of the hour, when it was time for him to field audience questions, he answered them in complete detail.

“If all members of the public could evacuate the room.”

Rose froze and turned to Robert.

“What? What’s happening? Did he pass?”

Robert chuckled as he said, “If he doesn’t, I’ll be shocked. But it’s time for the dissertation committee to ask their questions to him, and they’ll make their decisions after that. Though I am ninety-nine percent certain that the next time we see James, he’ll be Doctor James Tyler-McCrimmon.”

Rose grumbled under her breath but dutifully stood and followed Robert into the courtyard. She stopped at the door and caught James’s eye. She wriggled her fingers in a wave, and his easy salute helped ease the nerves she had for him.

The wait was agonizing. Rose paced and checked the time every few seconds, until finally, nearly a half hour after she had to leave, James burst out of the room.

His hair was a mess made from his hands throughout his presentation, and he was grinning widely as he ran right up to her.

“I passed!” he shouted, hauling her into his arms to squeeze her tight.

Rose laughed joyously as she hugged him fiercely.

“I’m so proud of you,” she giggled, peppering his face with sloppy kisses as he twirled her around in the air. “I knew you could do it!”

James set her on her feet and Rose pulled him down for a celebratory kiss. It was an uncoordinated kiss, grinning as they both were, but the sentiment was received as warmth and love bubbled deep inside them.

“Congratulations, mate.”

Robert’s voice broke them apart, and James turned away from his wife to embrace his father. Robert held him tight and murmured, “Your mother would have been so proud of you, James.”

James clenched his eyes shut, dual feelings of regret and elation tugging at his stomach. He desperately wished his mum could’ve been here to see him be awarded his doctorate, but he knew without a doubt he had made her so proud today.

They were soon swarmed by the rest of the science department—and random passersby who had heard the news of his success—who came to offer their congratulations.

James felt drunk on excitement and relief, and on the alcohol his advisor bought to celebrate, as James’s department flooded a local pub to celebrate. This level of elation was second only to his wedding day.

“I’m so proud of you, love,” Rose murmured into his ear that night as she hovered atop him, participating in their private celebration.
“Thank you,” he whispered raggedly, trailing his fingers and lips across her body. “I couldn’t have done it without you, Rose.”

She caught his lips in a firm kiss as they rocked together in synchronous motion.

They left for their second honeymoon the week after James’s thesis was accepted. They first went on a Mediterranean cruise and explored the various cities the ship docked in. Then they flew to Canada to hike the Rocky Mountains. After that, they stopped making concrete plans and instead hopped on a plane to whatever destination sounded best.

They hiked through national parks, kayaked across Alaska, snorkeled off the coast of Maldives, and played the role of stereotypical newlywed tourists in all of the cities they landed in. By the end of their trip, they’d managed to set foot on all six inhabited continents.

On the final week of their vacation, James told Rose he had one last trip in mind, but he wanted to keep it a surprise as much as he could.

“Airports, James?” Rose teased as they caught their second connecting flight. “Are you trying to get us to fly around the world?”

“Not intentionally,” he replied. “But this final destination is quite distant. And I know you’ll love it.”

“I can’t wait.”

They were making their last connecting flight, and this time, he couldn’t keep the destination a secret.

“New Zealand?!” Rose squealed when she saw the gate they were walking towards.

James beamed down at her and said, “Are you ready to take a wander through Middle Earth?”

Rose jumped into his arms and nearly knocked them both to the ground in her enthusiasm.

James preened with pride when he saw the awe in Rose’s eyes when they went on the official Middle Earth tour that New Zealand was becoming renowned for.

When they weren’t following the scheduled tours they’d signed up for, they were exploring the countryside on their own, reenacting the various scenes from the films whenever possible. (James was inordinately pleased with himself when he was able to get other tourists to join in their fun.)

“So, Rose Tyler,” James said on the night they returned to their flat. “Did you find your ten-week second honeymoon to be satisfactory?”

“Very much so,” she said, sinking lower into the bubbles of their bath to ease her cramped muscles from their flight home. “And that’s Rose Tyler-McCrimmon to you.”

James giggled high in his throat as he wrapped his arms tight around her waist. He absently stroked her belly and dropped sporadic kisses to her neck as they relaxed together.

“Did you ever think we’d end up here?” Rose mused quietly, running her fingers up and down his shins.

“Hmm?”

“You know, like when we were kids,” she prompted. “You must’ve imagined our life together?”

“Oh, certainly,” he replied, giving her middle a quick squeeze. “But this isn’t the end, Rose Tyler—
McCrimmon. Not at all.”

He leaned forward and coaxed her head back to press a kiss to her lips.

“The road goes ever on and on,” he murmured into her skin. “This is only our beginning.”

*The End.*

Chapter End Notes

Welp, that’s all for this story folks! Thanks to everyone who read, and a special thanks to everyone who left a comment.

And if you’re curious:

Rose’s Wedding Dress

Rose’s Necklace

Rose’s Earrings

James and Rose’s Wedding Bands

"Grow Old With Me" Wedding Dance Song

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