Playing the Hero, Being the Fool
by cgner

Summary

Lily’s life drastically improved the day she became Ladybug, superhero of London. Except for the part where she fell hard for her partner, Chat Noir, who doesn’t feel the same. James’s life was already great before he became Chat Noir. Maybe he’d fall in love with Ladybug if he weren’t so into his classmate Lily Evans. Together they battle unrequited love and, you know, Voldemort.

Notes

This is jily set in the universe of the cartoon series “Miraculous: Tales of Ladybug & Cat Noir,” only in London and not Paris. You don’t need to have seen the show to read this story. If you haven’t seen it, though, you should know that Miraculous is kinda super ridiculous. I wrote this fic with the same attitude that I have when watching the show: poke fun at the campy villainry and superpowers, and savor the impeccable love-square set-up. Four ships for the price of one! Hot damn.

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James jabbed his elbow into Sirius’s side. “Ohmygod, act casual.”

Sirius, wanker that he was, continued to wave his arm in the air. “Oi, Evans!”

James reached up and yanked Sirius’s arm down with more force than the task actually required, just so Sirius would glare at him. Sirius liked to look tough and cool in his leather jacket, but James had muscles Sirius couldn’t contend with.

One of the Yoda buskers taking a smoke break flicked a sidelong look at them, then went back to his cigarette.

“I swear,” James hissed, “do you even know the meaning of the word casual? There’s a Waterstones nearby—let’s buy you a dictionary so I can hit you over the head with it.”

He risked a glance across Trafalgar Square toward Nelson’s Column, where Lily was modeling a gauzy yellow sundress, one much too light and airy for April chills. As unfair as the dress was to Lily, the picture would look riveting. Her bright dress and hair would make a beautiful contrast against the melancholy sky. She kept twirling back and forth to make the skirt flare out, while a photographer crouched down to catch the enormous lion statue behind her as the background. She paused mid-flounce to wave at James and Sirius.

James plastered on a grin even he could tell came across as awkward, and mussed up his hair with one hand. Then he stopped, tucking his hands into his pockets and pretending he found the Yoda busker terribly interesting.

“What,” Sirius asked, “are you doing?”

“I thought that maybe I should pretend not to see her,” he said. “’Cause like, maybe that’s cooler. You know.”

“You brought us ten blocks out of the way to come here, so say hello or let’s get chips already.”

“Hey, d’you know her?” asked some moronic teenage boy next to them. “She is fucking fit as—”

“I’m her boyfriend!” James yelped. “Stop talking! Leave her alone!”

Sirius grabbed James’s arm and dragged him further away from the National Gallery entrance. James ducked his head down as they wound their way through the hordes of tourists. Why had his body grown so tall? Everyone could see him. Lily could see him. And oh, god, Sirius was only bringing them closer to her.

Once they’d descended the few stairs to the rest of the Square, Sirius stopped. “You can’t keep telling other blokes that you’re her boyfriend.”

“He was objectifying her—”

“Actually, you know what, keep telling people that. It’ll get into one of the tabloids, and then Evans will find out you’ve been saying it, and—”

“WhathaveIdone—”

“So. Are we saying hello, or are you going to be a twat?” Sirius regarded James for a full three
seconds, which was generous, before pressing fingers to his temple. “Right. Both are inevitable. Stupid of me.”

“She is a model. She is brilliant. How could I not be a twat in front of her?”

“Maybe I should just start ignoring this,” Sirius said to himself. “Maybe that would work.” He took hold of James’s arm again. “We were on our way to get chips, weren’t we?”

James’s eyes darted over to Lily. “I mean, yes, but she’s so—she’s so—” He sighed happily.

“What was that? I couldn’t hear you over my stomach growling. Let’s go.”

“Wait, d’you think I made it worse by playing it too cool? Maybe I should go over there—”

James never got to finish his thought, though, because the four gigantic lion statues around Nelson’s Column stood up with a simultaneous roar.

James groaned. “Now?”

“I’m going to get chips,” Sirius said, shouting to be heard over the shrieking crowd. “Meet you at yours later.”

James couldn’t reply over the magically-enhanced voice shouting, “I am Ringmaster!”

James swiveled back toward the National Gallery. A man stood proudly between two of the museum’s columns, wearing an outfit very predictable to his new, villainous title. He’d even acquired a black top hat and a whip. It was ridiculous. Either Voldemort let people choose their own atrocious costumes when he evil-ized them, or he chose the clothes himself and had the most offensive taste known to man.

“If these meddling buskers,” the man continued, gesturing toward the panicking people in front of him, “want to turn this historic building into a circus, then let’s give them a show!”

James only half-listened as he scanned the area, trying to find somewhere private. Why did these villains always have to show up in the most public of places?

The lions leaped down from their perches and prowled across the plaza toward the National Gallery, growling as people shouted and shoved against each other to get out of their path. The living statues and Star Wars characters and other buskers couldn’t escape, not with the sheer number of tourists surrounding them. The Yoda near James faceplanted after someone stepped on his long robe, tripping him up. James hauled him to his feet before someone could trample him, and shoved him into the crowd.

He prepared himself to pull Lily to safety too, but unlike the few gawkers trying to snap pictures, she apparently had the good sense to bolt from danger. Her distinctive red hair had joined the flood of people rushing into the streets in the distance.

He dodged through the crowd, making his way to the edge of the plaza, and spotted the perfect place across three lines of stalled-out traffic: a building under construction, with opaque plastic sheeting draped over the front scaffolding.

James slid over the hoods of stuck cars and shoved his way through terrified civilians to reach the building. He clambered up the metal frame, slipped under the plastic sheeting, and hoisted himself onto the first level of scaffolding.
He opened a flap of his jacket. “Oi, wake up.”

A cat-like creature the size of his fist floated out of his inside pocket, glaring at James with his bright yellow eyes.

“I know it’s time for your cat nap,” James said, “but the circus has come to town.” He held up his right hand, his silver ring gleaming. “Algernon, claws out!”

Algernon zipped forward, grumbling, and disappeared into the ring.

Power surged out of James’s Miraculous and rippled across his body. His black mask magically slid into place around his eyes, replacing his glasses. Two cat ears sprung into existence out of his now even untidier hair. A skin-tight suit rushed over his body in a matter of seconds, starting at his throat and working its way out and down, enveloping him in black. The moment his tail burst out from the back of his belt, James was off, reaching for the extendable silver staff that stuck to his lower back.

He leaped off the edge of the scaffolding onto a double-decker bus, landing smoothly, one hand planting on the bus in front of him.

Ringmaster was still lording over Trafalgar Square from the Gallery columns, which couldn’t bode well for the buskers.

But there was no need to worry about what had happened in James’s absence. A girl in a red suit with black polka dots was darting around Trafalgar Square, distracting the lions while more people forced their way out of the plaza. She flung her magic yo-yo up to wrap around the statue on top of Nelson’s Column, then pulled herself into the air, flying forward on the string, barely dodging the lion’s paw swiping at her.

Ringmaster cracked his whip. “My plaza will soon be the perfect place of tranquility. And unless you want to become cat food, you’ve no choice, Ladybug. Give me your Miraculous!”

She swung around the column on the string and flung herself back toward the lions, retracting her yo-yo in the process. The lions all pounced on the spot where she’d skidded to a landing, but she’d already hurled her yo-yo to catch on a lamppost, plucking herself out of danger once more. Two of the lions had no time to stop their leaps. Their brass heads clanged into each other.

James grinned.

He held his staff over the edge of the bus, extended one end out to hit the ground, and pole-vaulted himself into the Square. The strength of his suit launched him three stories into the air, wind rushing past him, his heart thudding with excitement. He shortened his staff and angled his legs where they’d need to be, keeping an eye on his target—

Within seconds he landed on the back of a lion running toward Ladybug, the brass ringing out beneath his feet, his arms flinging out to his sides to keep his balance.

“My lady,” he called.

The lion stopped in its tracks and let out a terrific roar, trying to shake James off his back.

“What time, Chat Noir,” said Ladybug. “Four on one seemed a little unfair.”

“For the lions, I assume.” He hopped with ease onto the back of the lion next to him.

Another lion swiped at Ladybug. She back-flipped out of the way, her dark red ponytail whipping
around. “I prefer my cat interactions to be one-on-one. It’s more…intimate.”

James laughed. “Arch jump and a barrel roll,” he said, and then completed that move off of the lion and onto the plaza. He thrust his staff forward like a sword, telescoping the far end out to knock one of the lions in the head before it could bite Ladybug.

He retracted his staff as he rolled under the stomach of a lion to avoid another one. Its claws screeched as they tore down its friend’s side.

James jumped to his feet again. “What’s the story on Ringmaster?”

“Think he works for the museum—he’s tired of the buskers hanging out in front of the building.” She cartwheeled out of the path of another paw. “Apparently they’re ruining the aesthetic.”

“On the list of London’s problems, that one’s got to be the highest.”

“I don’t know why we’re fighting villains when we could be fighting bad taste.”

“Nah, we’d still have to start with Voldemort.”

“The costumes?”

“My thoughts exactly.”

She somersaulted underneath a lion as it ran toward James, tripping it up. Then James whacked his staff against its head, fighting the recoil of smashing metal against metal. It only disoriented the animal for a few seconds.

James launched into a back handspring to avoid its jaws, the unnatural breath of the lion hot against his face. “As long as we’re talking thoughts, got any on the akumatized item?”

“It’s a little insulting to yourself that you have to ask.”

He tried to scope out Ringmaster, but an enormous paw was flying at his face. James extended his staff to push himself into the air, leaving the lion’s paw to tear at nothing. He hopped on top of another lion for a better view of Ringmaster. It was obvious—he should have noticed the plastic ID card still attached to a lanyard around his neck. Realistic items like that rarely stayed through the transformation, unless the akuma had hidden inside it.

At least most of the civilians had fled by now, save for a few professional and amateur journalists.

“As always, my lady is on point,” he said, bounding off the lion. “Unless it’s the whip, which, you know, some people—”

But Ladybug was stuck—one of the lions had stomped on her yo-yo string. She tugged at it with both hands, cursing, as two other lions lowered themselves, in preparation for pouncing.

James set his staff at a low angle and telescoped it out, launching himself forward with one arm out to the side. His arm wrapped around Ladybug’s chest as he sailed by her. Her arms encircled him immediately, their bodies pressed tightly together. They landed in a rolling, tangled heap, James’s side taking most of the impact, but he clung to Ladybug until they’d slowed enough to stop.

She was on top of him, her body warm against his suit, one hand pushing her slightly off of his chest. She stared down at him with those brilliant green eyes, her lips quirked in that pleased smile she wore during battle sometimes, the one that said she was having just as much fun as James.
He smiled back at her, and this was everything, being Chat Noir. This suit, this task, this partnership—this was perfection.

“Whips are a bit much for me,” she said softly, “but other things—”

Movement streaked in the corner of James’s eye.

“Lions,” he said quickly.

She jumped off of Chat, her yo-yo in hand—they’d had enough power to yank it out from the lion’s paw—and turned back to the fight. James leaped to his feet as the lions advanced on them from all sides.

“We’ll never be able to deal with Ringmaster as long as we’re busy with these lions,” Ladybug said.

Ringmaster was still up at the Gallery, shouting about how beautiful the Square looked with no lousy buskers. Every now and then he mixed in something about how Ladybug and Chat Noir needed to turn over their Miraculouses, but that was all rote stuff James could ignore.

“You might say we’re in an a-paw-ling situation,” James told Ladybug.

“Fewer puns, more fighting.”

“You wound my pride, when you really need to wound theirs.” He nodded toward the lions.

She sent him a flat look and hurled her yo-yo up into the sky. “Lucky Charm!”

Pink light burst out from the yo-yo. Then the yo-yo snapped back into her palm, and a new, duplicate yo-yo dropped down after it. She deftly caught it in her free hand.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” she said. “I already have a yo-yo.”

“Cats like playing with strings?”

He barely managed to finish replying before he had to put an arm around her waist and launch them into the air with his staff, throwing them both toward the top of Nelson’s Column. They landed together on the ledge at the base of the statue, their arms around each other again.

These were the views people would kill for. Too bad James didn’t exactly have time to enjoy it. Although he was enjoying it in a different way, really, his mind already spinning out new ideas on how to handle Ringmaster.

“I’ve got an idea,” she said, her face so near to his. “I’ll take care of the lions—you get the badge.”

“I don’t get to be the distraction this time?”

“You’re always terribly distracting, chaton.” She tapped a finger against his nose. “Now bring me down and get to work.”

“As my lady wishes.”

He brought them down just out of reach of the lions and let go of Ladybug. She landed behind a lion and swiftly wrapped the duplicate yo-yo around his hind paw.

“Wrap them up neatly for me,” James told her, dropping onto another lion. He leaped off at once, heading directly for Ringmaster and attaching his staff to his lower back.
“Anything for you, chaton.”

She’d run circles around those lions, tying them up in a nice package, leaving James to focus on stopping the source.

Ringmaster hadn’t moved from his perch between the columns. James tried to jump up to join him, but Ringmaster’s whip slapped into his chest.

“Christ,” James said, falling onto his arse and clutching his ribs. “I didn’t think you’d actually know how to use it.”

“Doesn’t the Square look better this way? No horrid cartoon characters or garishly painted living statues. Voldemort will let me keep this Square beautiful, and all you need to do to help is give me your Miraculous!”

Ringmaster hopped down to the plaza to advance on James, cracking the whip in the air.

James scrambled backwards. He managed to get to his feet just in time to leap to the side. The whip grazed against his shin as he darted away, drawing another curse out of him. The suit was mostly protecting him, but that whip still smarted. His chest ached where it had sliced against him.

“No!” Ringmaster lifted his whip for another attack. “Give it to me!”

James held up a hand. “Oh, this little old thing? You want it? Try to whip it off me!”

Ringmaster snapped his hand down, sending the whip directly at James—

“Cataclysm!” James cried.

More tingling magic poured into his hand, flooding it until it glowed black. The whip tried to wrap around James’s hand, but as soon as it made contact with him, the whole length of it disintegrated into black dust.

“No!” Ringmaster staggered back from James. “My lions, protect me!”

James bolted forward and snatched the ID badge on Ringmaster’s chest, yanking until the lanyard broke. He held up the ID, ripped it in half, and let the pieces fall to the ground.

Out of the broken badge floated a tiny black moth, the akuma now set free.

James shouted, “Ladybug, now!”

He finally had time to look back at the lions. The duplicate yo-yo was doing a terrific job of binding them together, its wire just as strong as the real Ladybug yo-yo.

She bounded up the stairs toward the National Gallery and flung her yo-yo toward the akuma. The top half of the yo-yo opened into two wings, revealing a bright white light that sucked up the moth.

The wings closed for a moment. “No more evil for you,” she said, and tapped the yo-yo to open again. A white, completely harmless moth fluttered out, circling once around Ladybug’s smiling face before disappearing up into the sky.

Without the akuma to power them, the lions had fallen still on the lower terrace. The duplicate yo-yo unwound itself from them and flew over to Ladybug, who tossed it up in the air.

“Miraculous Ladybug!” she cried.
The duplicate yo-yo disappeared in an explosion of pink light, which blanketed the Square, returning the lions to their original position. Any damage on them disappeared, and any scuffs on the ground vanished, as though the entire fight had never happened.

James couldn’t count how many times he’d watched Ladybug magically return things to the status quo, but his breath still caught every time. Magic was real. Magic was real, and James got to be a part of it.

He and Ladybug high-fived each other.

“Good game,” he told her.

Her green eyes were alight. “You too.”

James turned to the former Ringmaster, who had reverted to a normal museum employee with a tweed coat, a repaired ID badge, and frazzled white hair.

“What happened?” he asked.

James helped him to his feet. “Voldemort sent an akuma after you.”

The man scoffed. “Of course he did. He can’t stand the educated, you know.”

“No one’s proven that—”

“He wants to reduce us all to our baser selves.”

James sighed. “Look, just, I dunno, get some water and rest or something. No need to thank us or anything for saving your life…”

People—mostly reporters—had begun flooding the Square once the Miraculous light had cleansed it of evil. That, and the chirps from James’s ring and Ladybug’s earrings, meant it was time to go.

He bowed to Ladybug. “Until next time, my lady.”

She saluted him back, grinning. “Chat Noir.”

“Chat Noir! Ladybug!” cried different reporters, scrambling to reach them in time.

Ladybug flung her yo-yo to catch on top of the National Gallery, pulling herself into the air, and James launched away with his staff to land on a rooftop across the street.

Trafalgar Square was as pristine as it ever got below him, which meant some McDonald’s wrappers and discarded paper cups lingered in its corners. Already a busker in gold body paint was marching back to his place near the National Gallery entrance, with several camera-wielding tourists trailing behind him.

London was back to normal. For now, anyway.

He bounded away onto another rooftop, his only thought that he hoped Lily had got home safely.

James had always wanted to be a superhero. The problem was that most superheroes in the comics were born with their powers. In his first fifteen years of life, James had not noticed anything unusual about himself other than his unnaturally untidy hair and rhino-like nearsightedness. Not for lack of trying, of course.
His family had enough money that he easily could have gone the Batman route. But Bruce Wayne had been so much older by the time he got around to superheroing, and he’d had to lose his parents to get the money, so that route didn’t appeal at all.

The final category of superheroes came into their powers by chance. This was the category James found himself in.

The first day of school was, in hindsight, the most important day of his life. Not only had Algernon randomly shown up, but that was the day Lily Evans had walked into James’s life.

He’d been sitting in the back of the room with his mates, trying to think of new insults for Snape—Insult Snape was one of their favorites, and had also taught them many new words that had boosted their English grades—when she strolled in.

Maybe, under other circumstances, he would have been glued to his seat, his eyes drawn to her the moment she entered; they would have looked at each other from across the room, and he would have waved her over, welcoming the new girl…

But in truth James hadn’t even noticed her at first. He’d been too busy howling with laughter over Sirius’s latest epithet. Then Peter jabbed James’s side and said, “Who’s that with Snape?”

Snape and some red-headed girl were sitting in the front row, leaning across the aisle to talk in low voices.

“Got a girlfriend, there, Snivellus?” Sirius called. “I hope her hourly rate isn’t too high for you.”

“Now, Sirius,” James said, “I think we can assume that the mayor is paying for all of his needs to be taken care of—”

The girl launched to her feet, spinning back to them with her hands clenched into fists.

“I think it’s very clear,” she said, “exactly who in this room is desperate for female attention. Four boys over there and not one girl? I can’t imagine why you’re all stuck in the back where no one has to look at your faces—”

Snape pulled at her sleeve. “Lily, you can’t.”

Her skin went paler. So striking, really, against the vivid red hair and the bright green eyes.

And she did have a tongue on her, didn’t she? She didn’t hesitate at all, and as far as comebacks went, that had really not been bad, especially for having just met James and his mates.

But she was friends with Snape. She clearly had no taste or kindness in her, so James just tried to cock an eyebrow at her. He could never seem to figure out how to just raise one, though, so both his eyebrows went up, but he was sure his point had been made.

“Snivelly is standing down?” James said. “Oh, does the poor thing feel like we’ve bested him once and for all?”

Lily let out a slow, tense breath, like she was itching to unleash another tirade, but instead she sat down, her hands still in fists. Snape leaned over and whispered something in her ear.

Then he drew himself upright and said, “Rest assured that there will be no standing down, you insipid buffoons—”
“Mr. Snape,” said Ms. McGonagall as she marched into her room. “Sit down. The next word permitted to leave your mouth is ‘present.’ Kindly refrain from speaking until such an opportunity presents itself.”

Snape wasn’t idiot enough to mess with McGonagall, or to do much more than glare at James and Sirius the rest of class.

Peter passed James a note that said *that was brilliant!* on it. James just smiled in response, too busy studying the new girl while his hand tangled in his hair.

Apparently Lily—Evans, as James learned from registration—had something keeping her from going off the rails. This, of course, proved too tempting an opportunity for James and Sirius to ignore. All day, they lobbed paper balls at Snape whenever the teacher’s back was turned. They tripped him up as he came out of the loo. And they took every opportunity to ram their school bags into him in the corridors, mock-whispering insults along the way.

Per James’s instructions, they left Evans alone. But every little slight on Snape sparked a curious light in her eyes, her jaw clenching, and by the end of the day, James got his wish.

Before their last class, Snape lay in a fallen heap on a staircase, and Evans was advancing on James.

“You arrogant, bullying toerag—messing up your hair because you think it looks cool, walking down corridors and bothering anyone who annoys you—I’m surprised you don’t topple over during football practice with that fat head on your shoulders—”

“You know I’m on the football team?” James asked, just as McGonagall pried through the crowd and said, “Miss Evans.”

“Shit,” said Evans, and slapped a hand over her mouth.


Then her stern look softened, not into forgiveness, but concern. She tilted her head ever so slightly.

A distant fluttering noise grew louder, and then louder still.

James slowly turned around.

The noise grew closer, sounding almost like thunderous applause.

At the end of the corridor, a book sailed around the corner toward them. Not thrown. Not tossed. But flying. Legitimately flying—soaring through the air with its pages flapping like wings.

Dozens of books followed after it, a deafening flock of them hurtling down the corridor. James and Sirius shared a stunned look before turning their attention back to the impossible sight in front of them. Textbooks, paperbacks, even an atlas near the front—

That promptly dropped down from the pack to hurl itself into Terry Heaney’s face.

Terry cried out while other books pelted themselves at people’s heads.

“Run!” shouted McGonagall.

She tore open a cupboard and grabbed a broom, but James didn’t stick around to watch any further. He shoved Peter and Remus toward the other end of the corridor, Sirius at his side, and the four of them joined the melee rushing away.
James’s heart thudded in his chest. He was in terrific shape, sure, but he was used to dodging footballs, not magic books, and what the hell was happening?

He stopped every now and then and then to bat books away from others’ heads, earning razor-sharp paper cuts for his efforts, and then bolting to catch up to his mates. They had to get out of there, they had to keep moving, because who knew what had caused it, and maybe something worse would fly out after the books.

They all had sizeable bumps on their head by the time they crashed through an emergency exit. As they stumbled out onto the pavement, books sailed through the open door behind them, not content to be contained by the confines of the school.

“Oh my god,” James said, panting. “Oh my god.”

“It’s remarkable.” Remus stared up at the swarming books. “They all seem to have independent thought.”

A dictionary dove at them, but James knocked it away with his school bag. Several pages fluttered to the ground. The book recovered and made another attempt, this time going for the back of an old man with a long, white beard who was watching the school.

James jumped forward to pull the man out of the book’s path.

“Sorry,” he said, steadying the man by the arm. “You’ve got to watch out. We’re probably not mass hallucinating this… Probably.”

The man’s blue eyes twinkled behind half-moon spectacles. It was weird.

“Are you a student here?” the man asked, very serene for having almost been nailed in the head by a flying dictionary.

“Was,” James said. “But, you know, I think extenuating circumstances means we get to skive off a little early today.”

The man made an odd humming noise, almost like he was pleased.

“Er, right. Be careful, I guess,” James told him, and ran back to his friends.

After waving at McGonagall in the distance to show they were accounted for, he rounded up his mates and paraded them to his nearby home. His dad didn’t believe what had happened to them until they turned on the news. Then his dad had a fit of his own, asked all the unanswered questions James and his mates had already discussed, and sent the lot of them upstairs. He ordered them to stay put on the second-floor living room, shoving a tall pile of biscuits and croissants at them to “help them through their shock.”

James left his mates in the living room and headed up to the third level. He was going to change out of his shirt, which had a few specks of blood on it from his hands, but he got distracted by a dark, hexagonal box on his bed.

He dropped his bag on the floor and picked up the box. It fit neatly in the palm of his hand, but it didn’t have any markings or text. There was just smooth wood with a clean golden hinge at the back.

It opened without a sound.

Something flew out of the box at his face. His hand jerked up to protect himself, but the thing
swerved away at the last second.

He let the box tumble back onto the bedspread.

“Oh, come on,” James said, grabbing his book bag. “Not here, too. I’m already terrified of going to libraries ever again and I’d really like to keep my room trauma-free.”

The thing zipped around the edge of the room and then came zooming back toward James. He prepared to use his book bag as a bat again, but the thing dropped down to float above the box.

Upon closer inspection, it wasn’t a thing so much as a miniature orange cat. It had an oversized head, like a cartoon character, and tiny arms and legs.

The cat didn’t say anything. It just hovered there, staring up at James.

“Well,” James said. “This is weird.”

He and the cat had a stare-off for a while, James’s book bag still hoisted at the ready.

But it seemed the cat wasn’t about to claw at him. In fact, it gave him a pointed look, like James should have known what he wanted. Eventually he pointed a claw down at the box.

James slowly lowered his bag and reached down.

Part of him was saying, *Indiana Jones only ever got in trouble for this sort of thing*, while the other part was saying—well, the same thing, honestly, but in a more ecstatic tone.

The box contained a silver ring with a wide band and a flat circular disc, like an empty space where a large jewel belonged.

James didn’t think twice before sliding it onto his finger.

“What’s this all about,” he muttered to himself.

In a flash, the cat vanished into the disc, like it had sucked him up. The ring turned deep black. A green paw print appeared on the disc, a flood of black sparkly magic washed over him, and James found himself the proud owner of a supersuit.

“What about time,” James said, checking out his tail.

He could feel two ears twitching happily on his head, and he grinned.

Superpowers attained. That staff attached to his back was definitely a weapon of some sort, even if it didn’t seem to do much more than get longer. Beggars couldn’t be choosers, though, and James was no beggar. He was a bloody superhero!

The next step after suiting up was always battling evil, and there could be no mistake about the timing between the appearance of flying books and James’s new supersuit.

He climbed up to the rooftop patio, admiring the firm claws on his gloves, and headed off to the school.

Figuring out his staff turned out to be easier than he’d expected. Different buttons made it longer or shorter, while others turned it into some sort of phone-like thing. It seemed straightforward enough. He might have fallen a fair few times trying to get to Hogwarts, but it wasn’t too bad, and the suit had magical shock-absorption powers. Or, as he learned, *limited* shock-absorption powers.
And yes, maybe he fell in a wheelie bin once, but no one saw so it didn’t count.

Eventually he made it to the school via rooftops, terrifying only one child in the process, and found books still circling in the air overhead. Every now and then one would dive down to attack a journalist or police officer set up out front.

James snuck in through the rooftop entrance and headed for the library. He crept in from a side door and ducked behind an upturned desk, his heart beating wildly. It looked like a rain-free hurricane had swept through the room, leaving all the bookcases crashed sideways against each other, and stray pages carpeting the floor.

It had been a running joke in his class for years that Silvia Dodgson secretly slept in the library. And to some degree, maybe that would be true now.

She stood cackling on top of the librarian’s desk. Or some weird version of her, anyway, the kind that wore a stupid black and purple outfit, and saw fit to call out loudly that no one could keep her from her precious books.

He was sitting there, wracking his brains over whether he was supposed to turn her into the police or what, when Silvia shouted, “Give me that Miraculous!”

He peeked over the edge to see a girl in a red suit with black polka dots. Although she had a yo-yo instead of a staff, it was clear they were meant to be partners; her mask was the exact same shape as his.

There was also the clue where the suited girl was trying to stop Silvia.

It took about thirty seconds of James trying to help the girl before Silvia unleashed a new wave of flying books at them. In tandem, they jumped over some tipped-over stacks, whipping their weapons in frantic circles like shields to fend off books.

“I’m Ladybug,” she said.

“I’m—uh—”

She grinned at him, knocking away another book. “Still working on a name?”

“Guess so. What’s the plan? How do we stop her?”

“We have to get the akuma—”

“The what?”

Ladybug took a book to the shin, but shook it off. “The evil-ized spirit-thing that’s hiding in an object on her? The one giving her powers?”

James blinked at her.

“Didn’t your kwami explain anything to you?”

“Like…the cat thing that came with the ring box?”

“Probably.”

“He doesn’t talk, as far as I can tell.”
“What? How useless.”

James dove into a somersault to avoid a book. “You’re telling me.”

“You were able to transform, though—how did you get your kwami into your Miraculous without saying the right phrase?”

“He just kinda went into the ring, and then the suit showed up, and I booked it here.”

“First off, a pun at this time? Really?” She wrapped her yo-yo around a book to yank it away before it could smash into James’s face. “Second, aren’t you worried about any of this? You seem to be taking it all in stride, considering you had no explanation.”

He’d been given a fucking supersuit and was battling an evil villain—what was there to complain about or question?

James waggled his eyebrows, and felt his cat ears twitch in time with them. “I’m just that good.”

To his great pride, he was able to prove he was just that good by helping Ladybug snap the highlighter in Silvia’s hand. James distracted Silvia by running around, leading her up to the roof, and knocking books out of the air with his staff.

Ladybug had to explain to James how to use Cataclysm—”You only get one shot to destroy something”—and why she had to purify the dark moth.

“Oh, otherwise it’ll multiply,” she said. “We can’t just let it go.”

With James as the distraction, Ladybug got the sneak on Silvia, tied her up with her yo-yo, and snatched the highlighter.

James watched, fascinated, as her yo-yo removed the weird black glow from the moth akuma. It was impressive, but not as impressive as when Ladybug tossed the squirt gun she’d conjured with Lucky Charm up in the air, sending out that magic pink light to fix everything back to normal.

Damn. She had much cooler powers than him.

Still. James couldn’t complain. He could destroy anything.

His ring beeped, like it had twice already, and he watched one of the green paw prints flicker away. First it gave him powers, but now it seemed set on annoying him.

Silvia picked herself off the ground, pressing one hand to her forehead. “What happened?”

James placed a steady hand on her shoulder. “We could ask you the same.”

“The librarian banned me because I’d highlighted too many books.” Silvia sniffled, running her cardigan sleeve over her nose. “I ran to the bathroom so no one would see me cry…but this black moth showed up and disappeared into my highlighter, and then there was a voice in my head, and he said he’d help me get revenge if I helped him get the Miraculouses…and then I don’t remember.”

“It’s, er, all right,” James said, shooting Ladybug a desperate look.

“It’s not your fault,” Ladybug said. “Someone’s misusing the Miraculous that gives other people superpowers. Anyone who feels negative emotions is susceptible to his akumas.”

“Wait, that’s what happened?” James said.
“Finally,” she said, “he shows some curiosity—”

A flurry of dark moths swarmed in front of them, creating an enormous, fluttering face.

Silvia shrieked and ran for the rooftop door, but James and Ladybug reached for their weapons.

“I am Voldemort,” the face said. “I will have the Ladybug and Cat Miraculouses. Until they’re in my possession, London will not see peace.”

Ladybug shot her yo-yo into the face, which made James laugh, and snatched all the darkness out of the moths. They fluttered into the city around them, floating into the crowds and reporters that had gathered around the school, while James and Ladybug high-fived each other.

“Well,” James said, his blood thrumming with adrenaline and glee and satisfaction, “I don’t think London could ask for better superheroes, Ladybug.”

“You’re not short on confidence at all, are you?”

He flexed his arms. “Why should I be? Chat Noir’s a pretty great superhero. He’s got a lot to be proud of. I don’t know if you know this, but he beat a villain today.”

“With help from Ladybug!”

“Oh, my lady, I didn’t mean to offend.” He swept into a bow. “Chat Noir would clearly be nothing without the quick thinking and unparalleled agility from the lovely Ladybug.”

Her mouth slid into a smirk. “Well, I’ve got a suggestion for us, if that’s how you feel—”

“I paws-itively do feel that way.”

That exasperated look she brought out was—endearing. Charming. He wouldn’t have minded inspiring it more often. And, really, she was very fit, now that he had a moment to notice…

“And he does puns,” she said. “I knew there had to be something wrong with him.”

“Aw, you know I’m meow-gnificent. So meow-gnificent that I think we should go tell those reporters exactly who we are and how great we’re going to be at defending London.”

She frowned. “You want to go show off for them?”

“We’re bloody superheroes! They’ll want to talk to us, yeah? Get our picture in the paper and on the news.”

“You’ve got a couple minutes left as Chat Noir, and you don’t want to spend them with me?”

“Wait, what?”

“When you’re out of pawprints, you’re out of time. We have five minutes after using our special powers before the suit wears off. Hence the beeps?”

“Shit. I’ve only got two pawprints left!”

“Sorry to see you go, but I’ve got to run before we both turn into pumpkins. Not much point in a secret identity if you unmask yourself in front of the cameras.”

James gave the reporters below a lingering look, then reached for his staff. “Guess my big debut will
have to wait.”

She pulled her hand back, preparing to launch her yo-yo. “Until next time, Chat Noir.”

James swept into a bow. “My lady.”

She groaned, but James smiled, a small one to himself.

He was probably fooling himself that she turned a little pink. He was probably just desperate for a pretty girl to like him.

But maybe not.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

If you want to learn the basics about the TV show, I shared a video and my thoughts on the series on my tumblr here: bit.ly/2kfq5Nt

Lily ignored the calls and texts from the photographer in the square. Pierre hadn’t been doing that great a job to begin with, and besides, now she had a good excuse to bail on the shoot early. If she was diligent, she’d have time for a cat nap before she had to tackle her mountain of homework. Or to fondly reminisce about how neatly she fit into Chat Noir’s arms. Or, realistically, to try and fail to do homework while actually reminiscing.

She softly unlocked the front door, tip-toed inside, and pressed the door shut behind her. Being a superhero had helped with her stealth, she found, but Petunia must have developed echolocation.

She strode out of the living room. “You’re home early.”

Lily took a deep breath. “And yet you sound annoyed about it.”

“I need to know where you’re going to be.”

“I’m not giving you access to my phone’s location.”

“These are dangerous times—”

“Oh, really? Has something happened? I’ve had my head stuck in a jar for months and have only just worked myself free—”

“Lily.”

“It’s fine, Petunia. I was just there for another akuma attack—”

“Again?” Petunia asked sharply.

“—and I was fine. I ran away because I’m not an idiot. I am freezing after wearing this dress outside, but never mind hypothermia, my number one concern should be pleasing you.”

Petunia crossed her arms. “It’s quite clear you don’t care about my wellbeing. And after all I’ve done —”

Lily’s heart wrenched. “Save your speech,” she said, pushing past Petunia and heading for the stairs. “Or better yet, write it down in that stupidly curvy handwriting of yours, put it in one of your bloody pink envelopes, and set it all on fire.”

She thundered up the stairs, clambered up the ladder, and pulled herself through the trap door to the attic. She bowed her head to avoid knocking into the ceiling, fetched a biscuit from her drawer stash, and collapsed onto her bed.

Mary, her tiny red kwami with black dots and a huge head, munched on the biscuit while floating
over Lily.

“Oh, Lily, I think she’s just worried about you.”

“Psychotic stalker, is what she is.”

“She wants you to be safe.”

“She wants me under her control because she’s a maniac.”

“The truth is probably somewhere in the middle, isn’t it?”

“I don’t want to talk about her anymore. It’s too infuriating.”

Mary grinned. “Is this code for wanting to talk about a certain black cat?”

Lily grabbed her pillow from behind her and smashed it over her face. “I touched his nose!”

“Don’t lose hope. You’re being pretty clear about your intentions.”

“Fat lot of good that’s doing me.”

“Will it help if I remind you he made those terrible cat puns?”

Lily flung the pillow off her face. “Why aren’t they a turn off, Mary? They’re so awful. I should be so thoroughly unattracted to him on the basis of those puns alone.”

“He is very fit, according to the fansites.”

“His suit shows too much. I’m a teenager. It’s my hormones.” Lily jerked upright. “Oh my god. Since we’re more attuned to animals, do we go into heat in spring? Please tell me that’s what’s behind this being so bad lately.”

Mary booped Lily’s nose with her feet. “There’s no such thing. This is all human. It’s all you.”

“You’re no help at all.”

“If I could make him less appealing to you, I would.”

“I’ve got it so bad, Mary. It’s unbearable. I don’t think I’d be unattracted to him even if he only spoke in puns.”

“He’d be too confident about them being funny?”

“Exactly.” Lily sighed. “I’ve got to hold back. I’ve got to pull it together. I don’t like being pathetic.”

“You’re not pathetic. Love is a good thing, remember?”

“Except when it’s rejected and makes people vulnerable to akumas.”

“That won’t happen to you.” Mary snuggled up to Lily’s shoulder. “Now you should really take a nap. You earned it.”

“All right,” Lily said. “Maybe I’ll wake up, literally and metaphorically, and realize his punny self is not worthy of my attention.”

Her nap never manifested, though, not with Petunia around and in a mood. She pounded on Lily’s
door and demanded Lily come help clean the house, since she clearly had nothing better to do. Then there was the shopping to do, dinner to make, tidying up to do after.

By the time Lily actually started her homework, she would’ve liked to have been asleep. But there was no rest for Ladybug.

She arose bleary-eyed and half-slept through her classes. Dorcas jabbed her awake now and then, but Lily was exhausted enough that she accidentally said hi to Severus as she passed his desk. His face lit up, but she looked away, blushing furiously. How many times had she told herself she was never giving him another reason to think they’d be friends again, and then she made stupid slip ups like this.

She did keep up on his Ladybug and Chat Noir blog, but that was out of self-preservation.

During lunch she spotted Potter and his mates across the courtyard lawn, laughing hysterically, Remus actually doubled over in laughter.

“D’you know what’s weird?” Lily told Dorcas over their packed lunches. “I saw Potter and Black at Trafalgar Square yesterday.”

“Before or after the attack?”

“Before. I got away all right, and they must have, too. But I was in the middle of a shoot and I saw them there, up by the National Gallery entrance.”

“Yes,” Dorcas said, her voice going oddly flat. “A true mystery. Why oh why would James Potter end up in the same place as you.”

“It’s just, no Londoner hangs out with the tourists up there, right?”

“No. They do not.”

“Maybe he was going to the museum.”

Dorcas gave a hearty laugh.

“Maybe it’s a a shortcut for them to somewhere.”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“Well, you explain it, then.”

“I’m not going to be part of this conversation anymore.”

“On what grounds?”

“On the grounds of you’re being ridiculous.”

Lily shot her an annoyed look and took a bite of her sandwich. “I guess it doesn’t matter. The shoot ended early, at least, so it was a good day.”

She kept her fond recollections of how Chat Noir’s lean body had pressed flush against hers, and how that had sent her heart skittering, to herself.

Severus passed by Potter’s gang, or at least within shouting distance, but Potter barely seemed to notice. Severus seemed disgruntled, though—even more than usual. He was probably on the verge
of sending some other poor person into an akuma-vulnerable state.

She really shouldn’t have got started on the Chat Noir line of thought during lunch. They were 
distracting in the extreme—she couldn’t think of anything else during her afternoon classes. On the 
upside, though, they did succeed at keeping her mostly awake.

Sleep tried to tempt her home after school, but eventually played second fiddle to staying after for a 
bit. Slughorn offered to make her copies of some exciting new chemistry articles, and she endured 
ten minutes of his company in exchange. It was worth it to keep in his good graces. He never 
questioned her when she suddenly had to leave in the middle of class.

She escaped from his classroom by lying about a photo shoot, and rushed down the corridor to safety 
before stopping to put the articles in her bag. While she tried to shove them in without wrinkling 
them too much, she heard soft voices from around the corner.

One was unmistakably Potter.

“It can happen to anyone,” he said. “I’ve read up on it and no one’s immune.”

“I didn’t have to say yes.”

Bonnie Grogan, by the accent.

A choked up Bonnie Grogan. A sniffling Bonnie Grogan.

Lily mouthed a curse, stopped fiddling with her papers, and shamelessly eavesdropped.

“You were upset. No one thinks clearly when they’re upset.”

Bonnie blew her nose. “You’ve never been akumatized.”

“Not yet,” he said. “‘S probably only a matter of time. Also, you know, I’ve got more hubris than is 
medically recommended—it’s hard to bring me down.”

Bonnie managed a weak laugh. She’d actually been one of the tougher villains to face. The week 
before, Severus had made crass remarks about her recent weight gain, and Lily and Chat Noir had 
had to stop her from turning everyone into Barbie-esque plastic dolls.

Lily’s pathetic desperation had seeped out in that fight, too.

“Go save your boyfriend,” Bonnie had taunted Ladybug after her mannequins pinned Chat Noir to a 
wall.

“Not her boyfriend,” Chat Noir had said pleasantly.

Lily had found herself saying, “We’ll come back to that later,” and went on to save both Chat Noir 
and the day.

Around the corner, James continued, “The point is, Bonnie, that we can all agree on one thing, 
which is that Snape is a bigger prick than the Gherkin.”

Bonnie laughed for real that time.

“Blame him,” he said. “And Voldemort. None of it was your fault—you can’t stop being upset when 
you’re upset, you know? ‘S just not possible.”
Potter was consoling her. *Potter.* And doing a terrific job, by the sound of it. Lily was comforted, and she hadn’t even been akumatized.

“Thanks, James.”

“Anytime. I mean, don’t get akumatized again just to get some of my company. I’ll talk to you whether or not you’ve gone through a traumatic experience.”

Bonnie blew her nose again. “I don’t want to be that—that monster again.”

“Of course not. I’d off Snape for you but I think I might get detention, so.”

“Thanks anyway,” she said. “Maybe Chat Noir will do it for us.”

“Trust me,” Potter said darkly. “I’m sure he’s thought about it plenty.”

Their shoes squeaked against the floor as they started walking.

“Are you all right to get home?” he asked.

Lily took that moment to remember exactly how terribly rude eavesdropping was, and realize that she had made a strategic miscalculation in staying put so long. She sneaked as far down the corridor as she could, but that wasn’t very far at all before they came around the corner.

“Oh,” said Bonnie.

Potter, for his part, made a squawking noise.

Lily was a model. She was a professional. She would keep her bloody cool at that moment.

Or so she told herself.

She sheepishly turned around. “Oh. Hey. I didn’t think anyone was left here except Slughorn.”

“Hello,” said Potter, in an unusually low register. One of his hands shot up to settle in his hair. “Uh. Evans. Hello.”

“Yes, you said that,” Lily said. “And now I’m going to say goodbye. Goodbye!”

“Lily, wait—Bonnie, I’ll, uh… you can leave, and I’ll…”

If Potter thought he was going to give Lily shit for eavesdropping—well, she deserved it. She ground her foot onto the floor and spun back.

“Yeah?” she said.

Bonnie’s eyes were shiny with tears as she rushed past Lily, her face bright red.

“Shit,” Lily said under her breath, adjusting her bag strap on her shoulder.

“Yeah,” said Potter. He couldn’t seem to look at her quite properly, instead inspecting the floor, and then the ceiling. “Look, so, ah. About what you might’ve heard…”

“I won’t tell anyone.”

“No, I—I didn’t think you would, honestly—but I thought she would like it if it seemed like I was going to tell you off and, I dunno, threaten you to keep quiet…”
“She probably would like that, yeah…but you don’t have to tell me off. I know, all right? That was awful of me and I’m sorry.”

“Great. Then I can tell her that you were, ah, terribly frightened.”

Lily laughed. “Of you?”

He did manage a direct look at her then, albeit briefly. “I am terrifying, thank you.”

“Sure,” Lily said, and started to turn away from him. “If that’s all, then.”

Potter’s jaw moved, like he was going to say something, but then he sighed. “Yeah. You’re dismissed.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Dismissed, am I?”

“Er, yeah. I mean. Never mind.”

Lily shook her head, almost smiling, and headed toward the main entrance. “Later, Potter.”

His voice called out weakly from behind her: “Bye, eavesdropper.”

She gave a laugh, a disbelieving, vaguely bemused thing, and exited the school.

The sun bore down on her. It was a perfect day to find a quiet corner in a park, stretch out on the grass, and take a nap.

If only her schedule permitted it. One of the downsides of being a superhero: always being behind. There’d be no sun-napping for her. Just work, and lots of it.

All right, and lots of thoughts of Chat. But only because she’d earned it.

Lily had never intended to become a model.

She’d never intended to become a superhero either, but only because it hadn’t seemed within the realm of possibility, much like she never intended to walk on the sun or breathe underwater. She couldn’t intend—or not intend—to do impossible things.

The modeling thing, much like the superhero thing, had simply fallen into her lap.

A year before Mary had arrived with the Ladybug Miraculous, the woman behind Lily in the Tesco queue asked if she’d ever done any modeling. Lily threw her head back in a laugh by way of response. The woman must have slipped her card into Lily’s purse while Lily was paying, though, because it fell out when Lily later dumped her purse upside-down looking for her chapstick.

Lily binned the card immediately.

She had more important things to do, like convincing Petunia to send her to the same school as Severus. It was a remarkable place: It offered all sorts of extracurricular opportunities, small class sizes, and outstanding faculty. Severus could only afford to go because Riddle had basically adopted him, but Lily had no benefactor, only a miserly sister and brother-in-law.

It wasn’t that she didn’t have the money. Hogwarts had a hefty price tag, especially considering Lily’s old school had cost nothing, but her share of her parents’ trust would have covered it. Petunia just refused to release the funds.
“Your school was perfectly acceptable for me and Vernon. I don’t understand why it’s not good enough for you.”

But mediocre teachers wouldn’t get Lily into the best universities. And if her parents had ever made her promise anything, it was to go to the best university possible. To get an amazing education and to do something with it.

There were a few select scholarship seats available at Hogwarts, of course, but not nearly enough to go around. Not nearly enough that Lily could realistically get in that way.

Her reasoned arguments over dinner—this was what the money was for, this was what they would’ve wanted, this was Lily’s money to spend eventually—never seemed to make it past Petunia’s ears and into her brain.

“No,” Petunia said, and that was that.

Lily stormed back up to her room—although room was perhaps too generous a word, room implied she could fit more than a bed and a squat dresser in there—and stomped on the floor a few times just for fun.

She needed money, but she was fourteen. There were no decent-paying jobs for fourteen-year-olds —

Except.

She dropped to her knees and rummaged through her bin. Gum wrappers, discarded notes—and there, the card.

Marlene McKinnon.

Marlene saved her. Marlene got her training and contracts and well-paying gigs. Petunia had no reason not to let Lily attend Hogwarts, not when Lily earned her tuition and then some.

It burned, to watch that extra money flow right into Petunia’s coffers. To watch Petunia buy herself more pearls and dresses while Lily lived in a bloody attic.

But her fame and her money bought her a ticket to Hogwarts the next year. She got to join Severus. Provided, of course, she kept to the rules.

Thanks to Marlene’s brilliance, Lily’s face was plastered around London. But being the face of anything meant keeping her nose clean. There could be no tabloid snaps of Lily shit-faced drunk in a pub, or sniffing drugs in a school bathroom, or publicly presenting herself as anything other than perfectly nice and societally acceptable. There could be nothing that would ever possibly taint the brands Lily represented.

Those rules alone she could have tolerated, but then her cow of a sister had to pile on top of it.

“You are representing our family among some of the most distinguished families in London,” Petunia said. “If I receive one phone call about rude behavior—”

“I’m not rude—”

“I won’t have you disgracing our family name—”

“It’s not even your bloody name anymore, is it, though—”
“Lily.”

Lily bit down hard on her tongue. “Yes, Petunia,” she said. “I understand.”

And she had understood. She’d understood perfectly.

But then Potter was just as smug and awful as Severus had warned her, and the only thing that saved Lily from immediately getting pulled out of school was Silvia Dodgson’s akumatization.

Mary was waiting at home for Lily when she escaped the book barrage. Her kwami explained that someone had got hold of the Moth Miraculous, which permitted the user to grant someone temporary superpowers, and that Lily had been chosen to wield the Ladybug Miraculous. That all Lily had to do was agree, say two magic words, and she could run off to join her partner Miraculous in fighting evil.

She couldn’t speak her mind at shoots or at home or at school. But as a superhero….

She yanked out her own earrings and replaced them with the Ladybug Miraculous pair.

“Mary, spots on!”

Battling villains gave Lily a chance to be herself. It kept her in terrific shape. And, of course, it put her in frequent, painfully close proximity to Chat Noir.

He was too over-the-top to bear. Or he should have been. But after meeting him, it had taken exactly two seconds for her to physically approve of him, and the first fifteen minutes they spent battling Silvia Dodgson for her to learn that Chat Noir was strategic, quick-witted, and absolutely there when she needed him.

At minute twenty, when Lily was beginning to despair of ever succeeding as a superhero when she couldn’t stop one bloody teenager, Chat said, “Nah, we’ve got this. You’re awesome. I’m awesome. Watch this.”

He darted away from her and flung himself into the fight, snatching an encyclopedia out of the air along the way. He dodged a series of pelting books, used his staff to flip himself up and over Silvia while simultaneously dropping the encyclopedia on her head, and landed in a perfect somersault. Lily watched this brilliant maneuver with wide eyes, her heart stuttering for a moment, and then tied up the distracted Silvia with her yo-yo.

At the end of his somersault, he stood up with both arms in the air, like a gymnast, and said, “Nailed it! Did you see, Ladybug?”

Lily only caught the motion out of the corner of her eye, too busy with Silvia to give him her full attention—but he was always demanding it, wasn’t he? Always so pleased with himself, but in a dorky, puppy-like way.

He’d believed in her. He’d supported her wholeheartedly after knowing her for less than an hour, and then they’d worked together without even having to lay out their plan in advance.

She’d been a goner ever since.

Mary refused to say anything about whether the Cat and Ladybug Miraculous holders usually paired off. How could they not, though, when they were fated to share such a strong bond? It seemed inevitable, at least to Lily.
She’d got increasingly worse at holding back her feelings. Weirdly, though, he never really acknowledged her flirting. And if he ever did seem to be flirting back, he never seemed to mean it.

It was just…rough.

She knew it was wrong to want someone to get akumatized, but those were the only times she got to see him. They worked in perfect synchronization, and they always won, and then they had to rush off to find a safe place to detransform before their Miraculouses gave out. There was never time for her to admit something like I love you.

She’d tried, once, but that had ended so horrifically that she never worked up the nerve again.

But maybe one day she would.

There was no indication that Voldemort would let up anytime soon, and there was no reason to think they wouldn’t just keep battling him…

And for now, that was enough.

She’d make it enough.
The next villain after Ringmaster was actually James's fault. He'd tried to learn the lesson from when Terry Heaney had been akumatized, namely to always be nice when turning someone down for a date, but he really could have been much harsher to Helena Hodge.

Especially considering she'd been the one to reject Terry in the first place. Especially especially considering she hadn't so much asked James out as thrown herself into his lap and kissed him sloppily, and without consent.

He could have just shoved her off. He really, really wanted to because gross, but being Chat Noir had taught him some modicum of patience and restraint.

Being Chat Noir had also honed his skill for the dramatic, though, and instinct kicked in as he pushed her back and declared, loudly, that his heart belonged to another.

"Evans is never going to go out with you," Helena said, and pursed her lips for another kiss.

Any lessons learned vanished. James simply stood up, sending her arse-first onto the floor, and said, "Sorry."

Perhaps it wasn't a very well-conceived plan, but he could have been much crueler.

In the end, though, Helena was apparently upset enough that she broke down the door to the science lab that afternoon, transformed into a villain. Voldemort—or the akuma, it was so hard to know—had given her an eyesore of a magenta dress with matching, heart-shaped glasses.

"I am Heartbreaker!" she roared, pressing two fingers to the side of her glasses. "Everyone must know my pain!"

Twin beams of pink light shot out of the glasses and landed straight on Peter's chest. He immediately started bawling, scratching at his shirt over his heart.

"It hurts," he managed between sobs.

"Well, shit," James said, and dove into the mass of shouting students stampeding for the other door. Fortunately Lily was at the front of the pack.

If James were headmaster, they would have practiced evacuation drills by now because Hogwarts was definitely cursed on the akuma front. Some of the students around him were even muttering, "Not again," and, "Seriously?" and, to James's relief, "Why do they always look so ridiculous?"

Someone cried out behind James, collapsing to the floor. He looked back to find no one left between him and Helena, leaving her an open shot.

"JAMES POTTER!"

She lifted her fingers to her glasses again, staring right at him. The beams hurtled forward. He prepared himself to duck, bearing down just as Remus flung himself in front of James.

"Oh," Remus said softly.

He slid down onto his knees, and then onto his arse, one hand pressed against his chest.
James said, "Thank you!" and forced himself past some of his classmates.

Sirius ended up pressed against him, jostled by someone on his other side. "Can't say you didn't earn this one, James."

"I can't remember the last time you were helpful."

"I blocked Hodge from coming after you in the cafeteria when you ran like a coward—"

"I did not run, I was giving her space—"

Their bodies squeezed together to escape through the door after Tilden Toots. They stumbled through and broke apart in the corridor. Tilden didn't even look back before bolting away.

He wasn't alone—sensibly, everyone was fleeing. Even Slughorn was ambling down the corridor as fast as his corpulent body would take him.

Sirius grabbed James's arm and dragged him down the corridor, away from everyone else.

"She won't stop until she finds you," he said in a low voice. "It'll be too suspicious if you go missing this time."

"I know, I know." Both of James's hands tore through his hair. "I feel like a cad, but Ladybug's got to handle this one alone."

"And you accused me of not being helpful, when here I am, saving your arse—"

"I would've come to this conclusion on my own, thanks!"

Algernon popped his head out of James's bag and meowed, displeased.

"Sirius is right," James told him. "You've got to stay hidden."

Helena Hodge darted out from the lab. "POTTER!"

"Still don't want to be heartbroken, though!" James said, pushing Algernon back into his bag as he and Sirius took off down the corridor.

They wove through the school together, passing countless students and faculty who'd been reduced to teary messes. James let Helena keep grabbing sight of him before he and Sirius scampered off down another corridor. He couldn't transform, but he could keep her plenty interested in the school instead of London at large. And for once Sirius was at his side, exchanging roguish grins with each other and sliding around corners, which made for an exciting change.

They made it all the way to the third floor before Sirius ended up taking a hit for James.

He collapsed to the floor, one hand clawing at his shirt. "FUCK!"

Even though there was nothing James could do to fix things, leaving Sirius tore at him. "Sorry sorry sorry," he muttered as he kept on running. "Ladybug will be here soon."

He'd ducked back to the second floor when Helena caught up with him again. She was barreling toward him from the other end of the corridor, ready to shoot off another set of beams, when Ladybug slid out from a classroom between them. She whipped her yo-yo around in a frenzied circle at her side, creating a makeshift shield, and used it to deflect Helena's beams.
"Ladybug!" Helena said. "You're just in time to give me your Miraculous before I get my sweet
revenge."

Ladybug easily ducking the next set of beams. "Hard pass, thanks."

With Helena now focused on Ladybug, James stole away. He might not have been able to transform,
but that didn't mean Ladybug had to fight alone. He looped around part of the floor to end up in a
corridor closer to where he'd left her.

He peeked around the corner to see them still going at it.

"Psst!" he said. "Ladybug!"

"I'm a little busy here," she said tersely, leaping straight up to avoid another jet of light.

"No, look, it's me she's after, yeah?"

"Why am I not—all right. So?"

"So I'll give chase, and you can—"

"I don't need your help—Chat Noir will be here soon—"

She executed a perfect front handspring, dodging twin bolts of light, and landed right next to James.

She rushed toward him, wrapping an arm around his waist. He automatically looped his arms around
her neck, lifting his feet off the ground as she carried him a few steps away into an empty classroom.
She set him down and locked the heavy wooden door behind them.

"Look," she said, stepping away from him, "I really don't have time to be messing about with
civilians—"

"Well, aren't you elitist."

"That's not what I—"

Two fists pounded at the door. "LADYBUG! POTTER! YOU TWO BETTER NOT BE
SNOGGING—POTTER IS MINE!"

Ladybug's head tipped back as she gave a loud, singular laugh. "Oh, if only she knew."

James's lips twitched. "Too good for civilians, are you?"

"Got my sights set somewhere else—sorry to break your heart."

He bit down on his tongue. Hard.

"Speaking of," Ladybug said, "do you want to get heartbroken by that girl? Climb out that window
and get out of here."

"Doesn't really matter if I get hit, though, does it? You'll fix it. I mean, it'll hurt in the moment, but
only until you get the akumatized object, right?"

"POTTER!" cried Helena. "COME JOIN YOUR LOVE!"

Ladybug studied him. "You seem to know an awful lot about this akuma business."
"That's because I'm, er. A huge fan. Follow the blogs and all that."

"Oh. I never would have—that is, you don't look the type."

He passed a hand over his hair, puffing out his chest. "What type do I look like, then? Suave? Debonair?"

"Nearsighted."

"I'll remind you that I'm a lowly civilian here, and you're supposed to be saving me, not pointing out my one physical shortcoming."

"Who says I can't do both at the same time? I am a superhero, you know. Super is part of the title."

"Wow. Thanks. I feel really good about myself now. You really know how to sweep a bloke off his feet."

"Are you insulting my flirting skills? What, your pride is wounded just because I'm not throwing myself at you after two seconds?"

The answer was: well, yes, a little. Ladybug always had nice comments for Chat Noir tucked in her back pocket.

"You can work on your seduction skills later, yeah?" James said. "Because in the meantime—"

"—I can help! Seriously. And you can shove it in Chat Noir's face that you managed without him."

Ladybug looked at the door. "If it is you she's after…and if you really don't mind putting yourself at risk…"

He waved a hand. "Risk away. I'm fine. I want my mates to stop being in agony."

"Well—in that case, what we'll do is…"

She laid out a quick plan, threw open the door, and whipped her yo-yo into a manically spinning shield. This gave James the opening he needed to start racing down the corridor, arms pumping, shoes squeaking against the floor.

It was amazing, really, that Ladybug didn't recognize him. How many civilians had ever offered to help them? How many willingly signed up to play Chat's role as the distraction, or trusted her so implicitly to watch his back?

The answer was, in many months of superheroing, none.

"I snogged Ladybug!" James shouted to Helena over his shoulder. This was technically true, albeit not recently. "And she was a much better kisser than you, Hodge!"

Helena gave a veritable shriek of agony and gave chase to James at once, shooting off beams that landed everywhere but on his zig-zagging form. Granted, the zig and the zag weren't quite as easy without the added strength and agility from his suit, but his muscles had still trained this move. It was like riding a bike, only a million times more interesting.

He'd just made it to the corner when Helena cried out behind him.
He turned back to find her sitting on her arse, wrapped up in yo-yo string. Ladybug bent down to pluck a heart-shaped pin off of Helena's dress and crushed it beneath her foot.

She did some more yo-yo work, magic pink light flooded the school, and everything was back to normal. James slumped with his back against the wall in relief. Somewhere nearby, Sirius and Remus and Peter had been relieved of their agony.

Helena stared wide-eyed up at Ladybug. "Ladybug!" she said, stumbling in her haste to get to her feet. "I'm such a huge fan—would you sign my—"

Ladybug slowly backed away from Helena. "Er, that's great."

James dipped back behind the corner, out of Helena's sight.

"I've got to run," Ladybug said. "Good luck with your boy problems—bye!"

Her footsteps ran toward James, and almost she barreled into him as she rounded the corner.

"Oh, sorry," she said, backing off.

"Thanks would be more appropriate."

"I admit it: you were helpful, especially since my usual date stood me up. Thanks."

"I was super helpful, you might say."

"What do you want, a fruit basket?"

"You didn't even have to use Lucky Charm."

"And?"

"And I guess you could say I'm your lucky charm." He paused. "That wasn't meant as a come-on, by the way."

She laughed. "Are you always this ridiculous?"

"Almost always. Although substitute ridiculous with other choice words depending on who you talk to."

"Oh, I can just imagine—er. What was your name?"

"Potter. James Potter." It felt dangerously close to saying Chat Noir.

"I can just imagine, Potter. Thanks again for the help. Don't let your ego get so big that it carries you off into the atmosphere."

"How could it, when I've got people like you around?"

"Sounds like I'll have to regularly show up to put you down. Good thing this school seems to be the center of akuma activity."

"It really is, isn't it? I think it's the name. Voldemort just can't deal with such an awful name competing with his terribly dressed villains."

"And I think I can't deal with you any longer. I've got to run." She started to slip past him, saluting
him along the way. "See you around."

"Bye," James called after her.

He could've chased her down, he realized, and tried to see where she detransformed. He could have tried to figure out who she was.

But where was the fun in that?

And it really was safer not to know. He couldn't accidentally shout out her name mid-battle if he didn't know what it was. He couldn't be forced to out her through blackmail.

Besides, he figured, jogging down the corridor. He had some best mates to check up on.

He kissed Ladybug once, but since she didn't remember it, it probably didn't count.

On Valentine's Day, Terry Heaney got down on one knee in the cafeteria to offer Helena Hodge a pair of high-heeled shoes and a date. Helena being Helena, she turned him down with a scornful laugh. Terry tossed the shoes aside, ran out of the room, and returned as Dark Cupid. His arrows turned someone's love into hate, and also gave them an outrageous shade of dark lipstick.

The battle against him started out as nothing special. Unsurprisingly, James arrived on the scene first, and managed to occupy Heaney's time for a bit. Ladybug showed up by tackling James out of the path an arrow, and then pulled him into the kitchen.

"Chat Noir," she said hurriedly, her cheeks tinged red. "I wanted to tell you—before we get into all this—that I—I lo—"

A bow snapped nearby. James looked sideways, just in time to watch a soft-tipped arrow from Dark Cupid launch at him from short-range—

Ladybug threw herself forward, covering James's body. The arrow thudded against her back.

Her eyes narrowed as she shoved James away from her, her lips turning dark.

"I loathe you," she said.

"Bugger," said James, and he back-flipped out of reach.

It had seemed hopeless at first. Ladybug chased him all around the school and out onto the streets of London, trying to get his Miraculous. Even if James had managed to disarm her and destroy the akumatized item, he had no way of purifying the moth on his own.

It also occurred to James, as he came perilously close to getting his arm wrapped up in Ladybug's yo-yo, that Ladybug was under an evil spell. In English they'd just been deconstructing fairytale tropes; McGonagall had given pointed looks to all the ladies in class when they talked about the magic of True Love's Kiss.

As ridiculous as the concept of a healing kiss was, it was no more ridiculous than the outfits of Voldemort's villains. In fact, the two things seemed equally nonsensical to James, which meant there was no reason not to give a kiss a shot. He had to do something to try to get Ladybug back to normal.

"I swear," he said, leaping onto the offensive, "this is really not about me being a desperate teenage boy."
And so ensued a game of cat and ladybug, with James trying his damnedest to give her a kiss. It took the better part of half an hour, but he eventually pounced, pinning her wrists to the frozen grass outside the school.

"Sorry," he said, as she squirmed beneath him. "Normally the first thing I do with my mouth is ask, but—"

He bent down and pressed his lips over hers.

He'd never kissed anyone before. Given how awful this one was, he was willing to bet it was normally a much more pleasant experience. Kissing someone who didn't want to be kissed was emphatically Not Fun. It wasn't even really a kiss so much as him mashing his lips against hers. Not fun at all.

But it worked. Ladybug turned back to normal, seemed to have no recollection of what had happened while she'd been evil, and together they de-evilized Terry Heaney.

He never told Ladybug about the kiss. Even though his plan had worked, it seemed impossible to explain his logic at the time in a way that didn't make him seem like a bigger pervert than Terry Heaney.

Kissing Ladybug had been…unexpected. He might've wanted to give it another go, just to see what it was like to kiss someone consensually, and he had those initial fluttering of interest in her…but ultimately there was no room in his heart for Ladybug. Not after the first few days of the school year.

Back in September, their second day of school had tragically not been canceled. Sure, they'd just had a supervillain attack the day before, but Ladybug had fixed everything. According to the administrators, there was no reason not to proceed as usual.

The library and the school had been set to rights, as if nothing had ever happened, but James could barely pay attention all day. He couldn't help replaying every moment of the battle he'd waged right on these grounds, in that corridor, on that stairwell.

He'd hoped McGonagall might have forgotten about her summons, what with all the villainy, but she was no forgetful pensioner. At the end of the day, she called James and Evans to her office.

"Wait here, Potter." She pointed to a chair outside her door. "Evans, inside."

James was well-acquainted with this torture device of a chair. Once he'd tried to swap it out with another, more comfortable one from a thrift shop, but McGonagall had made Filch toss it out.

"It was my gift to you!" James protested.

"I'm perfectly aware for whom the gift was intended," McGonagall said, and made James write I will not dispose of school property without permission until his hand cramped.

Somehow she'd found this new splintered, uncomfortable monstrosity instead. He fished in his bag for a pen and paper to brainstorm cat puns, but then realized the obvious: he should have been eavesdropping on Evans.

The school had been built back when things were done properly, and doors were dutifully thick, but Evans was upset enough that James caught bits and pieces of their conversation. McGonagall knew the thickness of her doors, though, which made her half of things mostly inaudible.

McGonagall said something about an "auspicious start," and Evans replied, "I can't apologize
enough." He couldn't parse out the next bit, but he did hear, "I tried to ignore him—" followed by a pause, and then a laugh.

James huffed. McGonagall never shied from telling him exactly what she thought of him, but she didn't have to go sharing it with the new girl.

Evans's next bit was too soft for James to catch, but she added, "—can't risk my contracts—" and then, "I don't want to leave Hogwarts—" and then, "—ring my sister, my name will be off the roster tomorrow."

There was a long stretch of silence, and then, "Thank you. It won't happen again."

A chair scraped against the floor inside. James scrambled to scrawl anything on the paper to make it look like he hadn't been listening in. His handwriting had always passed for a two-year-old's scribbles, so hopefully Evans wouldn't notice he'd just written nonsense.

The door opened, and James permitted himself to smile up at Evans.

"Expelled, then?" he said.

"You wish," she said, and headed down the corridor.

James strolled into McGonagall's office and took the other familiar seat in front of her desk. Of all the teachers at Hogwarts, he did like her office best, if only because it always smelled like cinnamon and ginger. Otherwise it wasn't exactly cozy—the stiff furniture, dark colors, and tartan curtains didn't quite appeal to James's taste.

"At some point," McGonagall began, "I begin to question whether you've any sense at all."

James perked up. "You thought I had some?"

"A tragic mistake I don't intend to repeat. I've overlooked some indiscretions in the past—"

"I know I'm a teenager, but that word must sound awfully dirty even to you."

"You're fifteen now, Mr. Potter. Not everything can be chalked up to youthful ignorance. At a certain point you've got to make a choice about what sort of man you would like to be."

"A very tall one," James said seriously. "Possibly also the kind with a beard."

McGonagall sighed. "Detention, Mr. Potter. The next two days."

James saluted her.

She reached for her discipline slips. "And if you must pursue Miss Evans, do try to find a less antagonistic path."

"Pursue—I'm not pursuing, that's—you're—"

"That is all, Mr. Potter. You are excused."

"Pursuit," he muttered, grabbing his bag as he stood. "Honestly."

He stomped out to the main entrance, talking under his breath the whole way. "Thinks I'm wooing—I know how to woo, if I were wooing, which I'm not—"
He stopped in front of the doors, realizing simultaneously that it was downpouring, and that Evans was next to him, tapping away at her phone.

"Well, fuck," he said.

She didn't look up. "That was quick."

"My cursing?"

"Your meeting with McGonagall."

"My frequent flyer pass makes it go quicker." He rested a hip against the doorjamb. "Detention for me. You?"

"Same."

A wave of rain thundered against the door's windowpane. He'd escaped detention for the day, but this rain had effectively handed down another sentence.

"Seems like we're stuck here until it passes," he said.

She slipped her phone into her bag. "You might be," she said, and pulled out a compact umbrella. "But my ride should be here—now."

Through the sheets of rain, James could make out a fine black cab that pulled up at the bottom of the steps.

"Living the posh life, eh?" he said.

She laughed. "Hardly. The company only sent it to bring me to my photo shoot."

"Photo shoot?" Lightning flashed in James's brain—he had seen her before. Many, many times, in fact. It was impossible to miss her. "Shite, you're a model."

She gave a mock gasp while popping open her umbrella. "Am I?"

"It's bad luck to do that."

"My luck has actually taken an unexpected, positive turn." She thrust the umbrella over to him. "It looks like you could use this more than me. I've only got to make it to the cab."

James reached out, then pulled back. "Is it rigged to snap down on me or something?"

"No, you idiot. I'm not you." She glanced out at her ride. "Take it already. I've got to go."

He grasped the handle, staring at her. Something hitched in his chest. "Er—I—you...thanks. Thank you. I mean."

She pulled her bag close to her, put a hand on the doorknob, and said with a smile, "Have a perfectly awful evening, you obnoxious twat."

Then she rushed out into the rain, her hair and clothes drenched at once.

"Bye," James said faintly.

He couldn't help but watch as she gave a pleased shriek and raced down to the cab.
He'd been a complete wanker to her. He'd apparently nearly got her kicked out of school—he didn't quite follow the specifics of her conversation with McGonagall, but it was pretty clear that she couldn't let herself get in any amount of trouble.

All that, and she'd just given him her umbrella.

He made a small, pitiful noise, and let his forehead thud against the door.

Algernon’s face peeked out of James’s bag. James stroked one finger over his head while his eyes followed the blurry lights of the cab as it zipped away.

"Oh, Algernon," he sighed. "I am so fucked."
Chapter 4

Lily took a meandering route home after dealing with Helena Hodge, foregoing the Tube to wander along Thames Path for a few miles. The sun had come out for a spectacular spring day, she had no modeling business and minimal revising to do, and she'd bested a villain—all in all, an afternoon worth savoring.

It would have been nicer if Chat Noir had made an appearance, of course. He'd only missed two villains before: once when his family had gone on a last-minute trip to visit relatives out of town, and once when he'd shown up so ill that he'd sicked up after landing at her side. It took some debate, but Lily had succeeded in sending him home.

After all, he had that option. Ladybug didn't. There would be no end to the akuma without her, which meant no sick days for her. Fortunately Petunia and Vernon almost never traveled, and when they had gone to the Canary Islands for a week in January, they'd been more than willing to leave Lily behind.

She walked into the house humming, idly wondering if she should take the time to make homemade biscuits for Mary.

Her peace lasted all of two seconds.

Petunia strode into the foyer. "Lily Catherine Evans!"

"Petunia Francine Dursley. There, now we've been introduced to one another."

"Don't take that tone with me. Where have you been?"

"Mars. It's lovely, actually. I spent some time with Matt Damon, he was wonderful—"

"You should have been home an hour ago."

Lily went to set her bag down on the steps. "I walked a bit. Oh, don't tell me, the Conservatives made walking illegal now because that's how immigrants get around."

"I needed your help with supper—"

"You don't need my bloody help—I can barely peel a potato. You always say that, and I always end up sitting about after you tell me I'm doing a crap job—"

"I need to know where you're going to be."

"Not all the time! I'm not a toddler."

"There was an attack at your school earlier!"

"Yeah, and Ladybug sorted everything out. A logical person might conclude that I had to be getting home safe because there's never been two attacks in one day—"

"And there were never any villains before last fall!" Petunia's arms wrapped around her chest. "There's something freakishly wrong with London—and especially at that school of yours. No other place in London has had so many attacks—"

Guilt crept into Lily's stomach. "Only because there's one bloke at school that makes people really
vulnerable to akumas. I can't help that."

"We're moving out of London."

"Resorting to threats, now, are we?"

"It's not a threat."

"Vernon would never leave that ruddy company of his—he's too weirdly attached—"

"Vernon has already requested his transfer. We're moving to Sussex at the end of term."

They were moving out of London. Lily was moving out of London. Ladybug was moving out of London.

The air vanished from her lungs.

"What?" she forced out. "What are you—we can't—my school—"

"It's not safe. We're going to be murdered one of these days, or worse, permanently turned into one of those weirdo villains with their unbearable outfits—"

"Yes, that's the real worry here, what we might look like—"

"I've found us a house, and a school for you."

Lily lifted her chin. "I'm not going."

"Mum and Dad put you in my legal care—"

"Legal only," Lily muttered.

"—and I won't leave you behind to get killed by some lunatic freak."

"This isn't fair."

"Do you think all this stress is helping my situation, Lily? Do you?"

"Your situation. You mean your shit uterus?"

Petunia flushed. "There's no need to be crass. Female bodies don't care for this sort of stressful environment. I read about it online."

If Lily had had her yo-yo, she would have hurled it right at Petunia's face. Like Voldemort was keeping Petunia barren, instead of Vernon's thankfully inferior sperm. Voldemort had a lot of blood on his hands—blood Lily had cleaned away with magic—but the empty second bedroom was not his doing.

That stubborn jut of Petunia's chin was all too familiar to Lily. She could make arguments about how she'd become a bloody model to get into Hogwarts, how she'd worked her arse off all year to come in top of her class, and how she wasn't about to leave that position to start over at some new, inferior school…

But it didn't matter what Lily wanted. It didn't matter what her parents wanted. Lily was legally Petunia's to boss around for another year and a half, and unless Lily wanted to become a bloody runaway—a tempting thought—she had no recourse, no appeal, no judge to confront.
A frustrated noise slipped out between her clenched teeth, and she stormed upstairs.

Once in the attic, she let Mary fly out of her bag, and then flung it across the room. It collided loudly with the opposite wall, just below the lone window, and plummeted to the floor.

Lily would have loved to pace, but she couldn't even stand upright except in the center of the attic, so she was forced to stand still and tear at her hair.

"She can't, Mary, she can't—"

Mary flitted about Lily's head. "Oh, Lily, I'm so sorry—"

"I can't leave London! The akumas will get out of control—everything will be ruined—"

"We'll find a way to change her mind."

"No," Lily said, a hole opening in the ground beneath her. "We won't, I know we won't, she's stubborn and—and selfish, she never cares about what I want—"

"It sounds like she was worried about you."

" Worried, yes, but about herself and her stupid uterus. She's just pretending like it's partially about me—it's never about me—"

The walls of her cupboard of a room had never pressed in on her like this before, never threatened to smother her. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't stand to be in this bloody house with her bloody cow of a sister another moment—

And she didn't have to be.

"Mary," she said, "spots on!"

Mary looked like she was hesitating, but Lily sent her a wild, desperate look, and Mary disappeared into one of her earrings.

With her trusty yo-yo in hand, Lily escaped through her window and zipped around London, flying from one edifice to the next. There was nothing like this, nothing, and Lily was damned if she was going to give up that moment of weightlessness when she hit the peak of an arc, or the exhilarating fall back toward the earth, or the satisfying yank as her yo-yo pulled her from certain death.

London was hers, in a way it belonged to no one else.

No one, that was, except Chat Noir.

The news might've been a smidge less devastating if she'd had someone to talk to, but he was the only one who'd be able to grasp exactly what this meant to her. Unless they were both transformed, though, she had no way to contact him.

There was Mary, of course, but Mary was unfailingly, sometimes annoyingly optimistic.

And Mary hadn't said what Lily secretly knew to be true, which was that Lily did not have to keep wielding the Ladybug Miraculous. Lily would have to give it up if she didn't want London to fall to Voldemort.

She was alone in dealing with her fate, in facing the very serious possibility of having to give up her superpowers and her friends and her school. There was no one else to talk to. Dorcas might have
been some comfort, if she were more empathetic and if she hadn't been home with a fever. Besides
her, though, there was only Severus—and that was no option at all, not anymore.

She needed comfort. She needed someone to tell her things were going to be all right, but in a less
positive way than Mary—

What she really needed was exactly what Potter had given Bonnie Grogan: genuine support and
compassion, but not so much as to be cloying. Words she'd never expected to associate with Potter,
but she'd heard him do it with her own two ears.

The problem was that Potter wasn't her confidant, much less her friend—

But he did know Ladybug.

Lily gave the plan a full three moments of consideration before changing direction, heading straight
for Belgravia.

It was impossible not to know about the Potter bakery. Even if his dad hadn't come to Career Day,
everyone at school raved about their treats. Plenty of students had moaned about how jealous they
were that Potter got to live above such a famous, delicious bakery.

Severus, of course, had liked to make snide remarks about Potter's parents. They'd made millions
inventing hair care products, and now, in his opinion, were demeaning themselves by opening up a
quotidian business simply to amuse themselves.

Lily had never given the bakery much thought, but had passed it many times. It was hard not to
when it was so close to school.

Figuring out how to talk to Potter didn't occur to her as a problem until she was on his block. But as
luck had it, the Potters had a lovely rooftop patio, one covered in black wicker furniture, verdant
potted plants, and strings of twinkling fairy lights.

Potter himself sat sideways on the wicker couch, thumbs tapping furiously at his phone, brow
furrowed in concentration. A sweating glass of iced tea sat on the table next to a plate piled with
biscuits.

She landed deftly on the patio behind the sofa, one arm splayed to the side for balance.

He jumped to his feet with his fists raised in front of him, his phone abandoned to fall onto the sofa
cushion. "I warn you—Ladybug?"

"Oh, god." He looked down at the ground, one hand tangling in his hair, the other dropping to his
side. "Oh. Shit. Shit."

"What?" she said. "What, no, I—I'm sorry, I shouldn't have come, I wasn't—only earlier, you—"

He brought his head up. "Earlier I what?"

"You helped me. And I wanted to, er. Say...thanks?"

"Oh." His hand came out of his hair. "Oh, thank god, that's—right. Er. Sure, yeah, no problem.
Happy to, ah, do my part. And all that." He cleared his throat.
'You don't have to get all weird about it.'

"Weird? Me? Never. I'm cool as a cucumber, although those grow on the ground, don't they, so they're not really cold until we make them that way…" Potter narrowed his eyes. "Wait a minute. You don't do thank-you house calls."

Lily fiddled with the end of her ponytail. Oh, she really shouldn't have come.

"Well," she said. "No, I haven't, but that doesn't mean I couldn't start. It seemed…nice?"

His eyes lit up. "Couldn't get enough of me earlier, could you?"

"Oh, that's not—I'm…" The reason for her visit came crashing back down on her. "It's nothing. I shouldn't—this was a bad idea. I'm sorry."

She reached for her yo-yo at her hip, but he said, "Wait. No, I'm sorry, don't—why did you really come?"

"I…heard the biscuits were really good here."

He stayed silent for a moment, and then said, "Oh, well, in that case. Take a seat."

"I don't want to interrupt—"

"What, my phone? Nah, I was just playing a game."

"Don't students spend most of their time revising?"

"Maybe other students. Not this one, though. No need." He tapped his brain. "Like a steel trap."

"You did just ramble on about cucumbers."

"Evidence of my superior analytical skills, stored in my steel trap."

She snorted.

"Take a seat, my—honored guest." He gestured at the patio furniture. "Have all the biscuits you want. I've already ruined my dinner."

She walked over to a chair. "Your parents let you do that?"

He dropped back onto the sofa. "I may have caused a diversion to swipe these."

"Causing diversions is a regular thing for you, then? Bit of a peculiar hobby. Up there with collecting lint and following ants."

"Hobbies are important. They really bring a fullness to your life."

"Was that a pun about being full?"

"Me? Never." He shoved the biscuit plate closer to her. "You going to have one, or what? Lavender shortbread—my mum's favorite."

Lily picked one off the plate and held it beneath her nose. "It smells amazing."

"We don't put the Potter name on anything less than excellent."
"Let me guess: yourself included?"

Potter tucked his hands behind his head. "I'm glad you're catching on."

She fought a good fight against a grin, but ultimately lost. "And where does modesty fall on the Potter family value scale?"

"Modesty? Never heard of it. But I'm intrigued, tell me more."

She initially nibbled at her biscuit, but quickly found herself devouring it, and then several more, while they went back and forth about nothing in particular. She started out perched on the edge of the chair, but in no time scooted all the way back, rested one arm on the arm rest, and kicked her feet up onto the sofa cushion near Potter's.

"Did you apologize to the akumatized girl today?" she asked. "And I mean really apologize."

"Course I did. I'm amazing, remember?"

"Well, I'm miraculous."

He raised his glass of iced tea at her. "Didn't know you were a fan of the pun."

"Oh, I'm not. Trust me. That's really Chat Noir's thing."

"I didn't know he had a monopoly on them. Shame. I thought he'd be too busy saving London to constantly defend his title."

"Not today. Today he lazed about."

"Well, let's not make assumptions—"

"I know, I know. He was probably sick or stuck on a broken Tube car or something. I'm honestly not worried about him."

Potter sipped his drink. "Why didn't you go see him? About whatever made you want to come find biscuits. Not that I'm upset at having company, mind—normally my best mate keeps me entertained, but he got dragged to some awful family thing."

"I can't contact him if we're not both transformed. Protecting our identities, and everything…"

She'd almost suggested exchanging phone numbers countless times, but that was too personal—too tied to their real identities. Email was out, too, because anyone could glance over their shoulder, or hack into their accounts.

The only truly safe communication method came with their suits.

"Ladybug—are you…why are you really here?"

Lily focused on very thoroughly brushing the crumbs off her lap. "I…I needed to get out of my house. My family…"

She'd worked up the nerve to come here, he'd been more than pleasant as a host, and now she couldn't even tell him—although she really shouldn't have tried to tell him in the first place. He'd just met Ladybug today, for Christ's sake. He didn't exist for her to dump everything on.

"Say no more." Potter tapped a finger on his glass. "My best mate spends more time here than at his
"And I didn't—there's nowhere… They…" She looked away, out onto the neighboring rooftop where a pigeon hungrily eyed their biscuits. "They want to move out of London."

Potter choked on his iced tea. "I'm sorry, what?"

She smiled bitterly. "It's too dangerous here. There's a supervillain about, hadn't you heard?"

"Yes, but you're—"

"I know."

"Well, shite. Can't you just—I dunno, tell them? About why you can't leave?"

"Absolutely not. I'd be banned from being Ladybug in a heartbeat. They'd take away my Miraculous." Her lips twisted. "And sell it to the highest bidder, no doubt."

Potter's drink clinked against the glass tabletop as he set it down. "Fuck. Fuck."

And that was what Lily needed to hear. She needed someone to freak out over this. To curse and be angry and outraged on her behalf.

"They can't do that," he said. "They can't take you out of London. Fuck."


"You can take all these home and more, if you like. You need them."

"Going to go cause another diversion? On my behalf, no less? How chivalrous."

"Chivalry is second to excellence on the Potter family value scale."

"I've learned so much tonight. I won't even have to go revise at this rate."

He laughed, a little wildly, pressing a palm against his forehead. "Oh, Ladybug. I hope you've got a plan."

"A plan for helping you steal biscuits? Not exactly the intended use of my Miraculous."

"Yes. That's exactly the plan I meant. You're so astute, Ladybug. Steel trap in your mind, too. I can tell."

"I know what you meant. And I—I just found out. So no, I haven't got any brilliant ideas yet." She gave him a once-over. And this wasn't fair to add on, but there was such a perfect opening… "If you're so excellent, you figure it out."

"Hey, my family's excellence is firmly in the realm of chemicals and, by association, baked goods."

"Don't let modesty stand in your way now, not in my hour of need."

"I'll think about it, all right? But this is a little outside my area of expertise, so, you know…"

"No, I—I know. This isn't your problem."

It was her problem, and hers alone. But it would have been so, so nice to have anyone help out with it. If she didn't have to handle this, like so much else in her life, completely on her own.
"It kind of is my problem," he said. "I do live in this city, you know."

"You don't say."

"So I care. I do."

"Good to know you've got some eye toward self-interest. I did worry about that earlier today."

"You'll figure it out—you're Ladybug. And you can get Chat Noir to help you, too, I bet. There's no way you'll actually move out of London."

"I wish I had the same confidence."

"Stop by anytime—as we discussed, I'm overflowing with it, and I'm happy to give some away."

"Just like someone else I know," she muttered. Then she sucked in a breath. "Shit, what time is it?"

"Oh, uh—" James checked his phone. "Quarter past."

Lily jumped to her feet. "I've got to get home, she's going to kill me—"

He stood up, waving at the rooftop next door. "Shite, yeah, get out of here! Angry mums are a more terrifying force than Voldemort."

Lily's throat tightened. "Yeah," she said roughly. "They are." She took a few steps toward the edge of the patio, her hand poised on her yo-yo, and then remembered the manners her parents had worked so hard to instill in her. "Oh, um, thanks, by the way."

"You really can have more biscuits if you like."

"Thanks, but I meant…"

"Oh, hey, no worries. Someone's gotta save the superheroes, right?"

She gave a small smile. He hadn't come up with a plan, but he'd…he'd fixed her. As much as anyone could have, right then. He'd said what she needed to hear.

"Have a good night," she said. "And don't break any more hearts."

"I can't help it," he said. "My hair is a veritable magnet."

Lily couldn't fight back the laugh at that, either. Which was just fine by her.

"Bye, Potter," she said, and flew off across town.

Lily hadn't always been so isolated.

In primary school, she and two girls named Joann and Selim spent countless nights at each other's homes. They went to the pool and to the park and did all the normal childhood activities together.

Then one summer she caught a few neighbor kids circling in on a pale, dark-haired boy with hunched shoulders. She ran them off with her loud voice and her stubborn look, and from then on it had been her and Severus against the world. All her other friends faded away. It hadn't seemed like anything odd at the time—friend circles shifted quickly at that age—but now, looking back, things were rather obvious.
But it was fine, really, relying so much on Sev. She had her parents, and her sister, and a best friend that wanted to spend all his time with her, and that was enough.

It would have been better, of course, if Severus hadn't shown up to school every now and then with a black eye or a bruised wrist, but even that resolved itself in the form of Mayor Tom Riddle.

He'd been invited to help judge the school's year-nine science competition, and with Lily home sick, Severus presented their work on robotic aircraft alone.

Riddle was impressed. A connection was forged. And a rescue was completed.

The legal details were vague to Lily, but somehow Riddle was allowed to take Sev out of his home. He put Sev up at his hotel, and gifted him a coveted space at the finest school in London.

At the time, this all seemed perfect. Fairy godfather like, really.

But then that drink driver murdered Lily's parents, and Severus was living across town, and Lily had no choice but to move in with Petunia and Vernon and start at the local school.

She wasn't exactly in a mental place to make friends that year. She was too busy focusing on not crying all the time, and on becoming a successful model. Who needed friends there anyway, she told herself, when she would be at Hogwarts soon?

And then her work paid off, and she broke the news to Sev, and she strolled into Hogwarts proudly at his side.

But things weren't the same. It was no longer Lily and Severus against the world.

In their year at different schools, he had made...not "friends," really, so much as mutual acquaintances, ones whose families threw scads of money at the mayor's campaigns. Sev had barely told her anything about them except that they were clever and wealthy and exactly the sort of people the world needed more of.

The first day at lunch, he brought her to their table in the courtyard. Lucius Malfoy took one slow, appraising look from Lily's head to her toes, and then turned back to the person next to him, continuing their conversation as if Lily didn't exist.

"Excuse me—" she began, but Sev's hand landed on her wrist.

He subtly shook his head.

Because right, right, of course she couldn't go off the rails, not after she'd already lost it once that morning—

But also...there was that faint flush to Sev's cheeks. She'd seen plenty of his expressions over the years, enough to know that this particular flush was...embarrassment.

And this time, embarrassment over her.

She took a step back, out of his reach. "I prefer to eat alone," she said coldly.

He ate with her out of loyalty. At first, anyway. But then after a few weeks they bothered him about it, and said they had important business to discuss at lunch—like they had important business, they were bloody teenagers—and Lily increasingly ate by herself.

There were other decent people at the school, of course, but Lily had associated herself quite strongly
with Severus on that first morning.

Under other circumstances, she liked to think standing up for her friend would've served as an excellent mark of her character to the other students. The circumstances that were, though, involved almost no one liking Severus. Potter and Black subjected him to the worst, but everyone else looked at him with, at best, mild disdain. Walking down the corridor at school with Sev was like walking with Moses in the Red Sea: everyone parted around his stalking form.

Some of it, she figured, was the hygiene. He did have a bit of an odor, and there was that awful sheen to his skin and hair. And he was not...particularly kind. Those who didn't make way for him in the corridors were liable to get bruised by his book-laden bag.

And on top of that, he ran that bloody blog.

As soon as Ladybug and Chat Noir debuted, he made it his mission to "unmask those two blithering idiots. How do we know they're not the ones causing the akumas? It's probably all some asinine publicity stunt to make themselves feel important."

Riddle only encouraged him, buying him a professional website and fancy video editing software. "He," Severus said, sticking his nose up in the air, "supports my interests."

Even if Lily hadn't had a vested interest in keeping Sev ignorant of Ladybug's identity, she still wouldn't have supported his interest. Superheroes needed help, not stupid accusations. Lily couldn't protest Sev's blog too much, though, not without possibly revealing herself, and anyway, it was good to keep your enemies close.

Not that Severus was her enemy. Only on that particular thing, of course.

It was all he talked about for weeks. How old they looked. How their accents sounded. Where they had to live based on how long it took them to show up to villains.

This rambling did benefit Lily—she learned that the Miraculouses magically disguised her. Severus would have known Lily's voice and accent in an instant otherwise. But all the other students, save Sev's mates, stayed far clear of that blog, and of him. They'd been saved too many times by Ladybug and Chat Noir to think anything awful of them.

If it had just been Severus with a bone to pick about the superheroes, things might have gone differently in his friendship with Lily. But it hadn't been.

There was Riddle.

Before she became Ladybug, Lily had never had much time for following politics. She was young, and then grieving, and then furiously busy. But then small comments began slipping into Mayor Riddle's interviews about the city's plague of villains.

The first reporter to notice that Hogwarts was an akuma hotspot triggered it.

"I think it is notable," Riddle answered. "It's certainly notable. I think it's worth asking why this particular school is being targeted. I don't need to tell anyone the reputation of Hogwarts, or the type of student that it tends to attract. I think it's worth asking why several other akuma victims have been very successful individuals. In the last month alone, a hedge fund manager, a member of the House of Lords, and the director of the royal opera have all fallen prey to Voldemort. So yes, I think it's worth asking what sort of person has it in for successful people."

"Successful," Lily said, muting the television in Severus's room. She dropped the remote onto the
bed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He'd curled up in the armchair next to her, and looked up from his textbook. "You know what it means. That they're doing well for themselves."

"Rich, you mean. Loaded. Like that's the only metric for bleeding success—"

"Lily, you have to admit that most of the victims have had a certain amount of wealth—"

"Silvia Dodgson is loaded, is she? Funny, I was pretty sure her family lived on a council estate, but maybe they own the building, my mistake."

"I didn't say all of them, I said most—"

"But what would Voldemort care if someone has money or not? He just wants the Miraculouses from Ladybug and Chat Noir. That's why he sends out villains, to draw them out where he can try to get at them."

"He's perfectly capable of having multiple agendas, isn't he? And how do you know his stated motivation is his true one? It could be a ruse."

Lily clenched her teeth and forced herself to drop the argument. She had plenty of counter-evidence to present—two months' worth of villains, to be precise—but there was that damned line to walk between defending Ladybug and revealing herself.

Her ire didn't wane. It stayed with her, simmering beneath the surface, flashing at odd moments. At her photo shoot that weekend, the photographer kept scolding her for slipping into a scowl. And on Monday, when Avery sneered at her as he came to drag Severus away to their other friends, and Severus said nothing, Lily's irritation boiled over.

"What makes you so much better than me, hm?" she said to Avery, hands on her hips.

"Lily," Sev pleaded, but she didn't so much as spare a glance at him.

"You'd be better off leaving Snape alone," Avery said. "He's got better caliber friends now. Ones who are more like the people he'll be dealing with from now on."

"And what caliber is that? I pay my own way here—I earned my spot more than you ever did, you spoiled, snotty, sorry excuse for a—"

"Lily," Severus hissed, tugging on her sleeve. "McGonagall."

Lily's blood ran cold, and her tongue died down as McGonagall strode down the corridor toward them. She was too far away to have heard Lily, but their combative poses hardly looked innocent. Lily plastered on one of her charming model smiles, the one that said she was living a magnificent life now that this particular brand of foundation had hidden her very minor acne.

McGonagall didn't have anything to go on, not with all three of them suddenly playing nice, but she sent Lily a warning look before walking away.

The moment she was out of sight, Lily stormed off.

"Wait," Severus said, chasing after her. "Wait, Lily, it's not—"

She spun around. "It's not what, Severus? Please, finish that sentence."
"It's—it's complicated, all right? They're used to a certain lifestyle—"

"Lifestyle? You mean only interacting with other wealthy, ignorant pricks?"

"They're trying to set high standards for society—not let people think it's good to be at the bottom—"

"I'm a bloody model, Sev—is that not good enough? Not at the top enough? I'm not even on scholarship—which ignores the whole problem of them assuming lower income people aren't worthy of their bleeding time—" She forced out a breath. "You know what? Forget it. If you want to be friends with them, go ahead. But don't expect me to sit back and let them insult me to my face."

She turned around to head to class, accidentally running her shoulder directly into Dorcas Meadowes.

"Sorry," Lily stepped to the side. "Didn't see you there—"

"Lily, wait—"

"It sounded like she was done to me," Dorcas said, sliding between Severus and Lily. "She didn't tell you to fuck off, but it was close."

"Remove your interfering, obnoxious self from my presence—"

"That bit doesn't work on me. Here, I'll do it for her: fuck off. Come on, Evans."

Lily blinked, took in Sev's seething expression, and said, "All right."

Dorcas marched off down the corridor with Lily at her side.

"Thanks," Lily said.

Dorcas made a noncommittal noise. "No means no. Boys are idiots."

"You don't have to escort me to class."

"No one's escorting anyone. Walk with me or don't. Sit with me in class or don't. It's your life."

"Perfect," Lily said. "I can definitely work with that attitude."

Dorcas shot her a thin smile. "Then we'll get along just fine."
James spent the days after Ladybug’s visit slowly losing his mind.

First, there was the matter of Lily Evans smiling at him one morning while he passed her in the corridor. It had very probably lasted no more than one second, and it had been fairly absent, but she’d smiled. And oh, what a glorious smile it was. He had seen all the variations of her smile in her extensive modeling work. This one, though. This one had been short, and sweet, and just for him. Probably.

He spent the afternoon…all right, the next several days reliving and deconstructing that moment.

“D’you think she mistook me for someone else?” he asked Sirius, who held his textbook in front of his face in response.

“Of course not,” Peter said encouragingly. “She could never mistake the face that almost got her kicked out.”

“What Peter is getting at,” Remus said, “is that you’re…memorable. Unforgettable, one might say.”

“I feel like you’re subtly taking the mickey, Remus, and I won’t stand for it at all.”

“Will you sit for it?” Sirius muttered.

James punched him on the shoulder.

Beyond the Lily Evans Smile development, he desperately needed to talk to Ladybug as Chat Noir. The problem was that Voldemort rarely sent akumas one right after the other. James checked his phone for news alerts at every opportunity—and temporarily lost his phone to two teachers that way—hoping, oddly, for an attack. He wrote up a list of potential ways to contact Ladybug, but none of them panned out. He even took to lounging in his locked room while transformed in the hopes that she might call the communicator in his staff. But there was nothing.

It took almost a week after Ladybug beat Helena Hodge for Voldemort to akumatize someone else.

James’s phone vibrated softly in his school bag.

“Finally,” he whispered, unable to contain himself.

Sirius side-eyed him strongly.

One bathroom pass and a strip of bacon for Algernon later, and James was off.

He raced east across the city, bounding down The Mall with his staff. He passed Buckingham Palace and Charing Cross, heading straight for Fleet Street, where some media mogul was wreaking havoc.

Ladybug hadn’t arrived yet—and what if her family had already left, what if he was too late to help her—

But those thoughts had to wait. For now, he had to do what he could to minimize the damage from
the villain calling himself Media-tor until Ladybug hopefully showed up.

If she didn’t, they were all properly f*cked.

Media-tor wore a black and white striped shirt and a bright red newsboy cap—black and white and red all over, which was just completely unoriginal. What was less original, and more worrisome, was his camera. Every time he snapped a picture of fleeing pedestrians, it zapped them into the photos in the nearest available newspaper.

An abandoned paper on the café table near James held a photo of two silent, shouting figures waving their arms for help.

“You’ll all read the news now,” Media-tor cried, perched on the roof of a grey, two-story building. He gave a maniacal laugh that was, James had to admit, downright excellent. “Oh, Chat Noir, how nice of you to join us. I’m about to make headlines by taking your Miraculous!”

“Personally,” James said, launching up on his staff, “I was hoping events might develop a little differently.”

He spent several minutes trying to get close to Media-tor—if he could grab the camera, that would make Ladybug’s job easier, and keep more civilians from getting sucked into papers—but there was no good way to do it alone. Media-tor kept pointing that menacing camera at him, and James had to flip or duck or jump out of the way.

He took a break to hide behind a chimney across the street. If his aim were good enough, he could extend his staff from this distance to knock the camera out of Media-tor’s hands.

His aim was not that good.

A familiar figure landed onto the roof next to him.

“I shutter to think what kept you so long,” James said.

Ladybug rolled those lovely green eyes of hers. “Can we focus?”

“Technically, that could count as a camera pun.”

“Later, all right? I really am pressed for time today. I’ve got to talk to you after we beat him—it’s important.”

“Your wish is my command, my lady. You’d find all my paper puns tear-able anyway.”

She didn’t even seem to catch that one, already whipping her yo-yo around in a tight circle. “Meet me on top of St. Paul’s Cathedral when we’re done, and you’ve had a chance to charge up for another transformation.”

With both of them on the job, they beat Media-tor in a flash. Ladybug smashed the camera, purified the akuma, and nodded at James before disappearing down an alley.

He opted to hide behind Temple Church for a few minutes while Algernon happily munched on some bacon strips.

“I hope she’s got a plan,” James told Algernon, cupping him in the palm of his hand. “I’ve still got nothing.”

Algernon sent him a flat look.
“Hey, it’s a complicated situation, okay?”

Algernon growled.

“Yeah, well, I don’t hear any brilliant ideas from you either. Hypocrisy, thy name is Algernon.”

When Algernon had eaten his fill, James transformed back into Chat Noir and made his way to St. Paul’s. He found Ladybug waiting for him on a small balcony behind one of the front towers, pacing back and forth.

He took a seat on the stone balustrade. “So you can’t get enough of me in battle,” he said, legs swinging. “I get it. You wanted more Chat time.”

She approached him, lips quirked, and drew one finger slowly up his chest. “Chatting was what I had in mind,” she said in a low voice, “but I suppose I could be persuaded into…other activities.”

He laughed. “And here I thought you said we had something important to discuss.”

Her jaw clenched down ever so faintly, and she pulled back from him, running her hand over her ponytail. “I never pictured you as the straight to business type, chaton.”

“Well, since it’s the only real offer on the table…or balcony, as it were…”

“Right,” she said, shaking her head slightly. “If you want to get right to it, then we need to stop Voldemort. Once and for all, I mean. We’ve got to find him and take back the Moth Miraculous.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s menacing our city, that’s why.”

“Well, yeah, but that’s been going on for months, hasn’t it? Nothing’s changed there.”

“I’m sorry, do you not want to stop him?”

“No, yes, obviously I do—I just—erm…am wondering what’s got you all hot and bothered about it.”

“He’s not the one causing that,” she muttered.

“Sorry?”

“Nothing. Look, does it matter? I’m just—tired of it.”

He stared at her. Was she really not going to admit the real reason to Chat, when she’d so easily tossed it out to someone she thought she’d only met once?

“Is something going on?” he asked. “Are you all right? You’re not dying on me, are you? Because I refuse to let something like cancer take you when we’ve got this villain-fighting thing down to an art —”

“Chat—”

“Are you tired of being Ladybug?”

“No! Of course not. I love being Ladybug and I don’t want to stop…but we’ve let this go on long enough.”
His fingers tightened around the edge of the balustrade. “Fine,” he said. “Don’t tell me, your trusted partner, what’s really going on. That’s fine.”

“Don’t try to guilt me into telling you things.”

When it came down to it, he didn’t have much experience interacting with her over anything but battle tactics. They only ever met up for villains, and talked just as much as they needed to to save the day. Well, all right, they talked much more than was strictly necessary, but they never confided in one another.

Until she had. On his rooftop. But she didn’t know that, she didn’t know she could trust him, and revealing himself now seemed like the wrong move entirely.

He breathed out. “Fuck. I didn’t—I’m sorry. I’m just—I’m worried about you, all right? You’re my partner.”

The tops of her ears turned red. “Well—thanks. For your concern. Tell me more about what you feel in a second, but first help me think of how we’re going to do this. It’s not like Voldemort is ever going to come to us. He doesn’t need to.”

“He might. His villains are shit at getting our Miraculouses.”

“There is that.”

“But you’re right. People are scared. They’re tired of it, and Riddle is—”

“Completely exploiting this opportunity?”

“Exactly,” he said. “So you’re right. We can’t keep reacting—we’ve got to go on the offensive.”

On some level he’d always known they’d have to get to the root problem eventually. Finding time for planning had always been a challenge, though, what with Miraculouses always threatening to expose their true identities after fights. Making time had just never seemed like a pressing issue. Not when Ladybug’s yo-yo could so easily undo the harm of any akuma.

She climbed onto the balustrade next to him, but sat facing out toward London.

“Right, then,” she said. “What do we even know about Voldemort, then? We’ve got to start somewhere.”

“He wants our Miraculouses, I assume because he needs more accessories for his wardrobe.”

She smiled and nudged her shoulder against his. “I think we can also assume he’s a man, based on the one time he showed his face…or sort of showed it.”

“Or a phenomenally ugly woman with a deep voice.”

“He has the Moth Miraculous, which lets him give someone powers.”

“Only to people who are emotionally vulnerable…which is such a weird power.”

“My kwami said the Miraculous is supposed to be used for good, but he’s corrupting it.”

“How’s it supposed to work, then? People who feel sad get good powers? Or do people who feel good get powers?”
Ladybug frowned. “I’m not sure. I never asked.”

“Well, I can’t ask my kwami anything, so let’s hope yours knows the answer.”

“He still won’t talk to you?”

“Won’t? I’m pretty sure he can’t.”

“Maybe he hates your puns too much to talk to you.”

“You put on an awfully good show about hating my puns, but I see right through you, Ladybug.”

If he wasn’t mistaken, a tinge of a blush blossomed on her cheeks.

“I certainly don’t like the puns,” she said pointedly, but whatever point she was trying to make was lost on James.

He turned around to face the same way as Ladybug, the south of London spread out before them, hazy in the afternoon sun. He never got to appreciate the city properly when he was fighting villains. This was nice, actually, to just sit here for a bit. There was the red and white of the Blackfriars Bridge down below, and the sturdy frame of the London Eye in the distance. It was definitely not a quiet city, always buzzing, always humming.

He couldn’t imagine living anywhere else. Poor Ladybug, who was just as well-matched to the city’s pulse, was being forced to abandon her rightful home.

There had to be something they could do to keep her here. To beat Voldemort.

“You know,” he said, “we don’t know anything about any of this, really, except whatever stuff your kwami happened to mention.”

“And?”

“And—and there’s got to be like, I dunno, a book out there, right? With more information about this Miraculous stuff?”

“Someone has to know more than us,” she said. “I mean, we don’t even know how many Miraculouses are there are. Is it just the three?”

“And how did we end up with ours, anyway? I mean, I don’t know about you, but mine just showed up. I didn’t apply or anything. Not that I didn’t deserve mine.”

“Your modesty is, as usual, completely overwhelming.”

“Oh, come on, you know I think you more than deserve yours, too. But you didn’t do anything like an interview, did you?”

“No, same as you. Found a magic box in my room, and Mary popped out of it to tell me about my powers…” Ladybug’s eyebrows knitted together. “D’you know, I think there might be someone we could talk to.”

“Yeah?”

“Mary got sick one time, but like kwami-sick, really tired and groggy. She made me take her to an old man in Southwark.”
“And you never mentioned this?”

“It never came up. It was months ago, and then I sort of forgot about it… it was really embarrassing because I had to tell him she was some sort of exotic Asian rat.”

“You didn’t.”

“Like you’d have had a more brilliant idea. You’d probably have come up with some stupid pun that gave it away.”

“That’s true, I would’ve.”

“Anyway, he didn’t ask any questions about it, just did some hand waving and gave me a bottle of drops for her.”

“He didn’t flip out about seeing your kwami?” James said. “Who I assume is small and weird-looking and can, I dunno, fly?”

“Yous must be really dim if you think mine is stupid enough to fly in front of strangers.”

“I really wouldn’t insult mine. He’s been known to hide my things when I piss him off.”

She laughed, stroking one of his cat ears. “Poor kitty.”

He shivered faintly, but he was not going to purr. He was not going to purr. He was a human. One with very sensitive ears, yes, but a human all the same.

“So no,” she said, “he didn’t flip out. But it was weird all around. He had this funny smile on the whole time, and was like really calm about it, considering.”

An eerily serene old man who didn’t seem to notice something out of the ordinary…

“Was he high?” James asked.

“As it happens, he did offer me a dodgy-looking sweet.”

“Called it.”

She scratched his ear one more time, and he clung to the balustrade. He was not going to push his head against her hand.

“Even if he was high,” she said, pulling her hand away, “he still knew how to fix a kwami.”

“Then I dunno about you, but it sounds to me like we’ve got a field trip in order.”

She faced out toward the city, a faint smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. She had reason to smile – they were one step closer to keeping her in London.

It was funny, really. He could have traced the dips of her profile almost as well as he could have done Lily’s. He’d seen Ladybug from every possible angle, and touched every single part of her at one point or another. He knew her body so well, could read her intention in any subtle action in a fight, but he didn’t even know her name.

He didn’t need to. Not to know her. Not to trust her.

Or for her to trust him. Because she did. She trusted him to solve the problem, which was exactly
what she hadn’t wanted to ask James to do.

She caught him staring, and he looked away, face heating. Her smile slipped into a shape he didn’t recognize—coy, maybe.

“Soo,” he said. “Er. When’s good for you?”

They went back and forth on a few scheduling options, and eventually settled on Friday to visit the mysterious, possibly high old man.

“It’s a date,” she said.

“Don’t say that too loudly, or the internet will lose its collective head.”

She slowly stretched one leg out and then tucked it over the other. She had such long, shapely legs. Model-like, really.

“So what if they do?” she asked.

“Well I certainly don’t want to be responsible for breaking the internet. Not after all it’s given us. Think about all the cat videos. Would you want to live in a world without internet cat videos?”

“If it meant we could spend time together? Yes. Absolutely.”

“Oh, er. Thanks?” He scratched at his neck. “Don’t get me wrong, you’re dead brilliant and all, but I like really love cat videos, and not just because of the obvious.”

“Oh,” she said smoothly. “So do I.”

He looked at her strangely.

“We could watch some together sometime,” she said.

James laughed, swinging his feet in place. “Can you imagine the headlines if we started hanging out while transformed? Ladybug and Chat Noir go for a Chinese—civilians baffled, start looking for akumas in their fried pork.”

She brushed a hair out of her face. “Chat. I really do wish we could see each other outside of a fight.”

“It’d be fun, really, but I don’t know how we’d manage it. We can’t really go out in public like this, and we can’t go to each other’s houses without revealing who we are—”

“So let’s tell each other.”

James blinked. “What?”

“Let’s tell each other. I want to know who you are.”

He sighed. “We talked about this, LB. Superheroes always have to protect their identity, at any cost.”

Her hands tensed around the edge of the balustrade. “And what if we don’t have a secret identity anymore?”

“What d’you mean?”
“I mean—I mean I might not get to be Ladybug much longer, all right?” She pressed her eyes closed. “My family is moving out of London. They think it’s too dangerous.”

He’d heard it before, but it was still terrible enough news that he managed a hearty: “Buggering fuck.”

“And the Miraculous can’t come with me. Mary hasn’t said anything, but it’s obvious, isn’t it? It’s needed here.”

Finally.

“So we’ll stop him,” he said. “And then you can stay. Or you can—I dunno, move in with me.”

Her face snapped toward him. “What?”

“I mean we’ll figure it out, okay? You’re not moving.”

“You’d really—you’d let me—Chat…”

“It’s no big deal. My parents would—well, I’d have to tell them who I am…but it’d be worth it, you know. For you to stay in London. I mean, if you want to. You don’t have to leave your family, I’m sure you’d rather be with them, but being Ladybug—”

“Is the most important thing to me. My family…well, they can go hang, to be honest.”

James’s eyebrows shot up. He’d never known Ladybug to be overdramatic, but still.

“That’s a little harsh, isn’t it?”

“Not if you knew them.” She settled her warm, gloved hand over his; his pulse leaped. “But really, Chat, I can’t even tell you—that you’d even think of that…”

“It’s a serious offer, you know. I guess you’d get what you wanted, then—we’d have to reveal ourselves—”

She muttered something that sounded like, but was almost certainly not, “Hopefully in more ways than one.”

“Hm?”

“Nothing,” she said. “Thank you, really, but still—it’s probably time to beat Voldemort once and for all, don’t you think?”

She smelled really, really nice. Not flowery—almost spicy, really. He’d always known it, but he’d never really thought about it. Not until now. And she really did have such luminous eyes…

“Yeah, no,” he said. “You’re right. It’s time.”

“I knew you were cocky,” she said, leaning in toward him until their arms were almost brushing against each other. “I knew you were brilliant and strong and—well, loads of other things. But I didn’t know you were sweet.”

“Oh. Well.” His cheeks reddened. “I have to. You’re my—” He’d called her my lady as long as she’d called him chaton, but those two words now, in this context, refused to come out of his mouth. “You’re my friend.”
Her head gently rested on his shoulder, a few stray hairs tickling at his neck.

She was probably tired—they had just beaten a villain. It was hard work, superheroing.

Then her hand slipped from his hand onto his knee.

Probably for better support. They were dangling over a hundred foot drop.

It was definitely not because she was into him, that was just his bloody teenage hormones talking—well, not talking, more like flooding his veins and making his skin feel like it was on fire—

And maybe it wouldn’t have been so bad if she weren’t maddeningly fit, or if she weren’t in a suit that hugged every single one of her glorious curves—

Because yes, James had looked, he was human, but she wasn’t the one for him. That space was reserved for Lily Evans.

He cleared his throat. “S’pose we should be getting back, eh?”

She sighed happily. “We don’t have to go. I already have to make an excuse—what’s another few minutes? We never get to stop and enjoy the view, if you know what I mean.”

James was trying very hard not to enjoy the view of her body, or the warmth of her hand against his barely clad thigh.

Because she didn’t mean it as innuendo, of course—he was just a teenage boy, which was to say, a complete pervert in his head basically all the time.

“Er, yeah,” he said in a hoarse voice. “We really don’t. But, er, I’ve got”—an erection to avoid—”a friend depending on me getting back soon—so, you know.”

He’d never got an erection in his suit before, but he had a feeling that the suit, as brilliant as it was at protecting him from damage, would do nothing to shield him from embarrassment.

“D’you have to go?” she said.

He frantically scooted sideways down the balustrade, out of reach of her head or her hand or any other part of her.

“Yeah,” he said in a strangled voice. “I really do. But we’ll meet up soon to go find that bloke. That’ll be fun, eh?”

“I have lots of fun ideas,” she told him, and if he wasn’t mistaken, her voice was a little husky.

There was a cold going around. She was probably chilly and needed some extra heat from other people. That was all.

It was so unfair. She had no idea the effect she was having on him.

The effect he did not need because he was in love with Lily fucking Evans.

It was never like this in battle—then he was too focused on the mission to think about how often her breasts pressed against him or her legs entwined with his.

At least most of the time.
Ladybug sighed. “See you later, then.”

“Oh, and LB—this isn’t going to happen, but just in case it does…if you do leave London…I definitely want to know who you are, yeah?”

“You do?”

“We’ll have to stay in touch as boring normal friends instead of superhero ones, but yeah. Obviously I’d want to know who you are then.”


He frowned. “Um, okay. But you just said—”

She was already off swinging in the air, her yo-yo twisted around the top of the tower.

He called out softly to nobody, “Bye.”

He’d said the right thing. He was sure of it. But apparently he just had no luck when it came to red-haired girls.

At first, James thought there was no downside to being a secret superhero. He got to save the city. He got to whip out his terrific puns without Sirius knocking him upside the head. He got to skive off class.

Sure, he earned detentions as a result of that last one, but those would’ve happened anyway.

There were downsides, but it took time for them to settle in.

The most immediate negative aspect was that he had to hide his identity from everyone, including Sirius. Thankfully, that issue resolved itself rather quickly. The second time James sneaked into his room from the rooftop patio, still transformed, Sirius was lounging on James’s bed.

“Ha,” he said, glancing up from his crossword. “I knew it.”

“It’s a costume,” James blurted. “I’m just such a big fan.”

Sirius scribbled in another answer with his pen. “Sure you are.”

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“Don’t I? Color me shocked.”

“What color is that?”

“This one,” Sirius said, and flashed him a rude gesture without looking up.

James felt a bit of a failure after that, but no one else ever cottoned on, so that was all right. It would’ve been awful not to have Sirius to talk to during all of this. Especially since Algernon only ever ate bacon and gave James rather condescending looks.

Except the few times James had really risked himself or been extra clever to beat a villain. Then Algernon purred and rubbed his face against James’s chest. Those times James secretly treasured.

Lying to his parents about being a superhero was easy. They let him do whatever he wanted
anyway, and he could always count on Sirius to cover up for him. Lying to Remus and Peter was less easy, but manageable. They were mates, but they weren’t not brothers, not like him and Sirius.

The first time James really felt hampered by his secret superhero identity didn’t happen until the end of September. By then, James had stopped giving shit to Snape any time he pleased. That itself had been quite the sacrifice. Sirius didn’t care for the development at all.

“But we can’t,” James said. “Not if Lily’s there—”

“But if she gets taken out of Hogwarts I’ll never see her—”

“You’ve got her face plastered over your walls—I think you’ll manage to see her just fine—”

“Shut up,” James hissed, flapping a hand and glancing across the courtyard. “She’ll hear you!”

Lily did not hear, but she also did not seem to realize how hard James was trying for her. Or maybe Snape was still telling her about all the shit James and Sirius did when she wasn’t around, like throwing his bag in the bin or locking him in the closet that one time.

That was probably it.

But restraining himself with Snape was not the downside to having a secret identity—that was just a downside to being in love with Lily Evans.

The downside to not telling anyone he was Chat Noir presented itself before pre-calculus one day.

Vector had assigned Lily the seat diagonal from James, and Snape dropped by her desk before class. He stood there, ranting loudly about his hilarious fucking quest to unmask the bloke who was hiding right under his big fucking nose.

“Chat Noir must live near the school,” Snape said, “based on response times—no surprise there, not with his entitled attitude, the attention-seeking prat.”

“He’s a hero,” Lily said. “He saved those people from getting squashed by a giant iron monster. Please explain to me how that’s a completely self-serving act.”

“Everyone thinks he’s dashing, so bloody noble, but I see right through him. This is all about him, can’t you see that?”

“All I see is someone trying to stop a madman from ruining London.”

James said, “And looking damned fine doing it, too, if you believe the fans.”

She sent a flat look back at him. “If you thought I had issued you an invitation to join this conversation, here’s a clear rejection of your RSVP.”

“I was agreeing with you!”

No, no, that wasn’t right, he was trying to get along better with her, not argue with her. He tried smiling at her, a placating gesture, but it felt weird, and overstretched.

“Put that demented smile away,” she said. “You’re not fooling anyone into thinking you mean anything but”—Vector walked into the room—“good things, smiles are terrific.”
She spun back toward the front.

Demented was, in fact, the word James had been looking for. Lily was so clever.

Sirius kicked the back of James’s seat, but it didn’t knock the goofy smile off his face.

James did drop it later, when he realized he’d almost got Lily in trouble with Vector.

It wouldn’t have had to be that way if she liked him more. Surely if he let it slip that he was Chat Noir, she’d see him in a different light. She’d see that the noble, dashing person beneath the mask was him. She wouldn’t be so tempted to insult him thoroughly whenever the teachers weren’t around. She might have even been tempted to do something else with her mouth, something James would enjoy only slightly more than listening to her shred him…

He couldn’t tell her, though. Not in the least because he’d have to prove it, and more importantly, because she didn’t like him.

Not that he blamed her, after that first day. That was fair and totally earned.

But now he was basically harmless to Snape when she was around, and she didn’t even seem to appreciate it. She still thought James was rotten. There was no reason to believe that if he outed himself, she wouldn’t just think less of Chat Noir, instead of thinking better of James. She might have even disliked him enough to cause problems for him.

Then again, she was kind at heart, and appreciated what Chat Noir did for the city, so probably not…

It was still safer not to risk it.

He couldn’t reveal himself to her, but at least he could still give Snape shit if she wasn’t around. Or so he thought until mid-October.

In retaliation for Snape dumping tea all over James’s phone, James stole his homework from the library when Snape went to the loo. This was par for the course for them—nothing to make James feel particularly guilty about, especially not when it was getting justice. He savored the loud, frustrated curses Snape let off when he came back.

But then Evan McNamee laughed at Snape’s outrage—rightfully so—and Snape verbally eviscerated him. James did have to give Snape credit for inventive insults every now and then, but unlike Lily’s rants, Snape meant every word in the worst possible way.

When Snape wrapped up his tirade, which mostly focused on McNamee’s admittedly beaver-like teeth, McNamee’s eyes brimmed with unspilled tears. He snatched up his belongings and fled the library with his hand over his mouth. It didn’t take long for Voldemort to pounce, and soon enough McNamee was on a rampage, turning everyone in the school into animals.

James actually got turned into a black cat while trying to protect Ladybug. He had to say, being a small, vulnerable, meowing animal in battle was not fun in the least. To make matters worse, Ladybug and Sirius gave him shit about it for weeks.

Being a cat had sucked, but so had watching Snape turn his ire on someone else, when James was the one who deserved it.

McNamee was the first victim at their school that James sought out to console.
However, telling McNamee, “Hey, so, I know Snape was a prick about your teeth, but it was my fault, and your teeth aren’t that big, so, er, sorry…” was, it turned out, a pretty ineffective way to make someone feel better.

McNamee punched him below the ribs, knocking the wind out of James. James didn’t hit him back. Justice had been served.

James learned two lessons from this. One, he shouldn’t tacitly insult people while trying to apologize. And two, he couldn’t bother Snape without risking someone else suffering. The backlash would really, truly come back and hit James. Not just through punches, but through new villains to battle.

Sirius took this change even harder.

“So you mean we can’t do anything?” he said, leaping to his feet to start pacing around James’s room. “You can’t honestly mean nothing is on the table. Not you, James. Not about him.”

“I’m not saying we have to be best bloody friends with him. I’m just saying that, you know, until Voldemort backs off, I can’t go pissing off Snape when I know he’ll make someone else vulnerable to an akuma.”

“You beat all the villains.”

“I can beat them, yeah, but people hate being akumatized. I don’t want someone else to have to go through that because of me.”

In the end, James and Sirius negotiated that name-calling was still on the table. They could still bang up against Snape, or give him awful looks, or make fun of him to a mild degree. They’d draw the line at anything that would tip Snape over the edge, and it wasn’t like they didn’t know exactly where that was.

So began the era of Trying to Leave Snape Alone, Mostly.

The era sucked.

Their brains kept churning out ideas, but they had nothing to do with them besides write them down on their list of Post-Voldemort Shenanigans.

Remus and Peter didn’t understand the change at first either, but James gave them an edited version of how he’d felt bad that McNamee had been hurt because of James, and that cleared everything up.

His policy of mostly non-engagement with Snape sucked even more by the end of October. Because while skiving off class was no hardship, skiving off football practice was another matter entirely.

That casualty of being a superhero still stung. There were only so many practices you could miss before the coach actually bought you a trophy that said World’s Biggest Flake. It was meant to be a last warning.

But James couldn’t heed it. He couldn’t stay at practice, not when the Lord Mayor of London was akumatized.

Unsurprisingly, Riddle had taken particular offense to that one. Riddle was the proper, elected leader of London, but the Lord Mayor position was too close to his own.

“Voldemort’s agenda becomes ever clearer,” Riddle told a reporter. “To take a stab at the champion of the entire financial sector speaks to the anti-capitalist, anti-success motives of this villain, and I, for
one, don’t intend to let him terrorize us into complying with his wishes. On that note, tomorrow I’ll be presenting my response to the EU’s latest attempts to stifle our economy through the hedge fund directive…”

While Riddle was capitalizing on the supervillain in his own damn city, James was making a mad dash back to practice.

It was too late. Shacklebolt had noticed.

“You’re off the team, Potter.”

“But—”

“Take your trophy and go.”

James sulked all the way home, tossing his flake trophy in a wheelie bin on the way.

“Some superhero I am,” he told Algernon once slumped on his bed. “I can’t even stay on my own bloody team.”

Algernon sat cradled in his hand, and licked his palm with his tiny, rough tongue.

James almost smiled. “Thanks, mate.”

He’d made the right call picking superheroing. It meant giving up next year’s captaincy of the team—not that it had been promised to him, but it was clear to everyone that he was the natural successor—but it was well worth it.

Except for the part where Snape had new fodder for antagonizing James. Because while James and Sirius were trying their damnedest not to bother Snape too much, that sentiment did not run both ways.

“Head swelled up too much to remember your practices?” Snape said as he passed James in the corridor. “Think you’re so much better than everyone else that you don’t need the practice?” He clicked his tongue. “Such a shame, Lily does have a fondness for football players—”

“She does?” James said, the words slipping out before he could help himself.

Snape relished the momentary desperation on James’s face, silently mocking James with a cruel, thin, knife of a smile.

James made a frustrated noise and stormed away before he punched that stupid smile off of Snape’s face.

Yes, there were definitely disadvantages to being Chat Noir. But, on the whole, they didn’t come close to making it not worth it.

Chapter End Notes

An amazing reader made a manip of Lily and James as Ladybug and Chat! Check it out here: http://aka-the-butterfly-murderer.tumblr.com/post/157317852672/yes-i-had-to-make-james-and-lily-as-ladybug-and
Chapter 6

Lily kept her frantic thoughts to herself all throughout history class, and then for the entirety of her photo shoot, and then throughout dinner and cleaning up after. At least she didn’t have detention—at some point she’d pulled the model card for all her unexcused absences—but that didn’t make the day go by any quicker.

Her homework sat in a daunting but ignored pile on her desk while she sprawled out on her bed.

“Mary,” she said. “He invited me to live with him! He really doesn’t want me to leave!”

“I heard, Lily, I heard!”

“But as friends.” Lily clutched at her duvet. “I mean, I was practically throwing myself at him at the end, and he did everything but bolt… God, he’s not interested, is he? Or does he really just not have any idea that I love him?”

“It’s all right,” Mary said, zipping back and forth overhead. “I promise. Even if he’s not interested —”

“So you do think he’s not interested!”

“I really can’t say, can I? But even if he isn’t, it’s not the end of the world, is it?”

Considering how many villains she’d faced off against, Lily knew, objectively, that this was not the end of the world. She’d come a lot closer to that than most people. She knew what the glowing neon signs and terrible villain costumes looked like.

And yet.

“I never should have asked him to help me find Voldemort,” she said. “I could’ve been kind of happy then, not knowing how he really felt—”

“You need his help, and you know it.”

“Do I, though? I mean, really, visiting one old man—and, er, oh. I suppose you heard our plans.”

“His name is Dumbledore, and I think you’re finally ready to properly meet him.”

Lily propped herself up on her elbows. “Wait a minute. You mean I could’ve talked to him about this before?”

“He’s a guardian—he has a specific role to play.”

“And that role isn’t telling me basic things like, what the hell a kwami is, or why was I chosen, or—”

“He’ll answer some questions, but it’s your responsibility to recapture the Moth Miraculous. Yours and Chat Noir’s both.”

Lily flopped back down. “Fine. But don’t think I’m done being upset about this.”

“That I didn’t tell you about the guardian earlier?”

“That too, but mostly Chat Noir.”
“That’s all right. I’m here to listen if you need me.”

Lily looked up at her. “You’re too good to me, Mary.”

“And you’re not good enough to yourself.”

Lily permitted herself five minutes of moaning to Mary before tackling her schoolwork. Maybe she’d been too forward, or maybe not forward enough, but that didn’t stop her from needing to revise for her exams.

As it turned out, she didn’t need to worry about whether or not she’d been clear. Others handled it for her.

When she walked into English the next morning, she found a bunch of students huddled around Lucinda Zheng’s desk, talking excitedly.

“I told you,” Lucinda said to Bonnie Grogan. “Pay up.”

Bonnie grumbled and reached into her school bag.

Lily wandered over to Potter, who was standing just close enough to the group to be clearly interested, but also not wanting to look like it. He was pretending to pay attention to his phone.

“What’s that all about?” She nodded at Charlene Stebbins, who seemed to be on the verge of very happy tears.

Potter started, his cheeks flushing. “Um,” he said. “They’re—it’s—”

It turned out he wasn’t pretending to pay attention to his phone. He’d actually pulled up a photo with a bold headline underneath.

SUPERHEROES SNUGGLE ON ST. PAUL’S

She clapped a hand over her mouth. “Shit!”

What had she been thinking, throwing herself at him in such a public place—in such a perceptibly romantic way, with such a romantic view in front of them—

Chat Noir was bound to see this before Friday.

Chat Noir would know. He would know for sure how Lily felt, and he would—well, she didn’t know, but he would know.

“Um,” said Potter.

“It’s—er—I’m only thinking about—Sev.” Her face was redder than her Ladybug outfit. “He’s going to have such a field day with this.”

“Fuck, he is, isn’t he? Fuck.”

“This is just—I mean. Not that it affects me…but does everyone think that it’s true?” She glanced at Heather Jordan, who was pumping her fists in the air in triumph. “That Ladybug and Chat Noir are together?”

Potter rubbed the back of his neck, looking down at his shoes. “I guess so? But come on—they’re not—it’s not like they were kissing, they were just being close, you know?”
“Right!” Lily squeaked. “Yes, I bet that’s it. They’re always hanging off each other in battle.”

“Exactly. There’s no reason to think that there’s any, you know, funny business going on.”

“Absolutely not. And feel free to spread that around.”

“Yes,” Potter said. “Brilliant idea. I’m going to go do that right now.” He waved at the growing mob around Lucinda. “Some people, right?”

Lily nodded frantically. “Right. They’re just…mad.”

She slid into her seat, scoping out the other students. Could everyone tell that she was way too worked up about something that supposedly didn’t involve her? Oh, god, what if someone suddenly saw her red hair and green eyes and realized what a terribly uncommon combination that was—

But no, the Miraculous would protect her. From embarrassment in front of her classmates, anyway. Not from Chat Noir.

Friday was going to be excruciating. What if he really hadn’t known she fancied him? He’d have third-party proof now, and then he’d have to let her down gently…

Or maybe not. Maybe he’d realize that she meant every flirtatious word, and maybe he’d secretly been harboring his own feelings for her, and he’d be so thrilled that he’d bring her up to rooftop, press her against a chimney, and kiss her soundly—

But that was super unlikely.

But not impossible.

She fantasized about the wonderful and horrific possibilities throughout the rest of the week. She’d have talked it out if she could, but Dorcas was no help on boy or superhero matters, and Mary was just relentlessly positive about everything. This, as usual, left Lily to her own mental scenarios and resulting light insomnia.

Friday came much too quickly.

Lily had lied and told Petunia she had a shoot after class, when really she ducked into an alley to transform and headed south across the river. A light drizzle picked up as she swung her way across London, just enough to notice but not enough to be truly annoying. She had much bigger concerns causing knots in her stomach than a little bit of rain.

Chat was waiting for her on top of the Imperial War Museum, a dark, striking figure against the white central dome. She landed next to him, and had to fight the immediate impulse, as always, to move closer to him. To stand next to him and wrap her arms around those firm shoulders in greeting. To let her fingers toy with the soft, short hairs at the back of his neck.

She could only do those things if somehow, miraculously, he had been holding back his own feelings all this time—

His hand leaped up to embed itself in his hair. “Er, hi,” he said, which answered any question of whether he’d seen the news.

“Hi,” she said meekly. “How, er, are you?”

coughed. “You?”

There was no pressing her up against the museum and snogging her. No joyful embrace. Only stilted, awkward conversation, his blatant discomfort, and the sudden cold flooding her stomach.

She was such an idiot.

She turned away and reached for her yo-yo, icy disappointment seeping into her veins. “Let’s go.”

“Um…okay.”

“Try to keep up.”

She shot her yo-yo off to snag on a flag pole, and then a phone tower, and on and on across Southwark, moving as quickly as possible, her pulse galloping. Flying across the city usually felt right, felt natural, felt good. There was a flow to it, a rhythm that normally soothed. Today, though, it wasn’t enough to lessen the cracks splintering across her heart.

Her body flew forward of its own accord—it knew where to go, but that left her mind to focus on the awfulness of things. He didn’t feel the same, didn’t want her, didn’t obsess over her the same way she did him.

Chat caught up to her near Burgess Park, on top of a block of flats, and managed to grab her wrist.

“What’s the rush?”

She answered without looking back at him, pulling her wrist free. “I’ve got other things to do today.”

“Besides stop Voldemort?” he asked incredulously.

“Come on,” she said, and was off again before he could speak.

He didn’t like her, he didn’t like her, he didn’t like her—

Right now it couldn’t matter what he felt, or rather, what he didn’t. They had a job to do. Then they could go their separate ways and Lily could finally move on to a normal boy who didn’t flood the world with atrocious puns.

Rooftop to rooftop, they kept on moving, Lily desperately trying to keep Chat a safe distance behind her. She eventually dropped down onto a narrow side street, in front of a three-story building with a crumbling brick façade.

Chat landed gracefully next to her and looked up at the sign above the door. “Apothecary?”

“Well read. You must be at the top of your English class.”

“Someone put on their sassy trousers today.”

“I’m wearing a suit.”

“You know, I’m starting to think you might be just a smidge upset.”

“No,” Lily said, “I really think you’re imagining things.” She marched into the apothecary, sending a tiny bell jingling above the door.

Heavy curtains cut the clouded afternoon sun into a few shafts of light. Ancient sconces gave the
room a warm glow, highlighting the wall of tiny walnut drawers behind an antique cash register. Above it, yellowed, stoppered jars perched precariously on narrow shelves.

The shop smelled musty, like old books, with a rich, earthy undertone of—

“Do I smell pot?” Chat whispered next to her. “I told you he was—”

“It’s sage,” she bit out.

“Well spotted, Ladybug,” said Dumbledore as he emerged from behind a curtained doorway.

Chat gave a loud, surprisingly pleased laugh, but Lily just grimaced.

“Chat, Dumbledore. Dumbledore, Chat Noir,” she said. “I didn’t know that one of the side-effects of being around Miraculouses was being infected by puns.”

Dumbledore’s bright eyes seemed to twinkle as he smiled. “You must remember that I chose you,” he said. “An appreciation for the finer points of language was not a requirement, but I admit, I have a certain fondness for likeminded individuals.”

“Hey,” Chat said. “You were outside my school, weren’t you? The first day of school.”

Lily narrowed her eyes at Dumbledore. “The same day that I stopped you from getting hit by a car after you fell.”

Dumbledore stroked his long, white beard. “I find that a bit of a ruse can, on occasion, benefit us all.”

“So you just gave us our Miraculouses and left?” Lily said, taking a step forward. “Without explaining anything, or introducing yourself, or—”

“It is the way of the Miraculous.” Dumbledore gestured toward the back of the shop. “This might be best discussed in private over a cup of tea.”

Lily pressed her lips together and strode into the back room, where Dumbledore had once dabbed different herbal extracts over Mary’s tiny form. She threw herself into one of the four plush but worn wingback chairs set in a square.

Chat strolled in at a more leisurely pace, taking in the maroon, velvet-flocked wallpaper; the dingy, brass-horn gramophone on a side table; and the intricate silver gadgets filling an entire bookshelf.

His presence tried to lure her over to him, even though he wasn’t trying, but she had to ignore it, had to pretend things were fine so they could work.

Dumbledore followed both of them in and began preparing tea on a sideboard. Lily begrudgingly accepted a cup of oolong, while Chat took a cup of jasmine.

Once they’d all settled into chairs, Dumbledore said, “I believe you came prepared with questions?”

They’d had questions. Lily knew that they had. But she was still too much of a mess to think or remember things clearly.

“Perhaps you’re curious why I chose you,” Dumbledore said.

Chat and Lily shared a look.
She almost wished they hadn’t—that was too normal a gesture for what she was going through, too much of a reminder of how well matched they were.

But he didn’t like her, he didn’t like her—

Chat shrugged. “Not really. We’re both awesome.”

Dumbledore smiled over his teacup. “An unusual attitude among many your age, but certainly not an unwarranted one.”

“I think we were wondering more about the Miraculouses in general. Like, what are they, and where are they from, and—and how many are there, and the Moth Miraculous—how are we supposed to find it?”

“I should caution that I will only be of limited assistance. The origins of the Miraculouses are a heavily guarded secret—”

“Guarded by whom?” Lily asked. “You?”

“I am one of a select few, yes.”

“Then you could tell us. You have the information.”

“I am afraid that for the moment I’m unable to focus our conversations on this subject.”

She set down her teacup and scoffed. “Why not?”

“The reasons are myriad. Rest assured, I intend to share with you select additional information about the Moth Miraculous—”

“That’s ridiculous. You trust us with the Ladybug and Cat Miraculouses, but not to learn more about them?”

“What Ladybug means to say,” Chat said, “is that we would love to hear about the Moth Miraculous.” Then he added, “But it’s also pretty fucked up that you won’t tell us everything.”

“Youth cannot know how age thinks and feels,” Dumbledore said. “I can only hope that the information I offer is sufficient to assist in your endeavor.”

Lily slowly sipped her tea while Chat did his best to pry information out of Dumbledore. As genial and dotty as Dumbledore seemed, he was tight-lipped when it came to anything important.

Chat tried, though. He leaned forward and his hazel eyes lit up and his ears twitched with enthusiasm, and sometimes Lily forgot she had tea at all, she was too busy trying not to smile stupidly at him. Every time she caught herself doing this, she had to mentally scold herself for being so catastrophically dim as to keep pining after a boy who was not interested.

By the time their tea had turned to dregs, the only important things they’d learned were that the Moth Miraculous could only be used periodically; that it had a limited range of influence; and that there were, in fact, other Miraculouses.

“The Cat and Ladybug Miraculouses are simply more powerful than the others,” Dumbledore said. “The Ladybug Miraculous offers the power of creation, while the Cat offers the power of destruction. They are a paired set, meant to be wielded in tandem by a pair of trustworthy individuals. If any one person were ever to wield both Miraculouses simultaneously, they would
achieve what the documentation refers to as ‘absolute power.’”

“What does that mean, though?” Chat said. “Absolute power—as in god-like powers? Or absolute power over, I dunno, cats and ladybugs?”

“As I have never personally attempted such a unification,” Dumbledore said, eyes twinkling, “I find myself ill-equipped to say.”

Chat slumped in his seat, his ears drooping. “You know, I had kind of hoped Voldemort just really liked jewelry. Knowing he might get even more powerful if he got our Miraculouses is a bit of a downer.”

Lily snorted, but then coughed to try to cover it up.

“Having seen the chaos he’s tried to wreak with only the Moth Miraculous,” Dumbledore said, “I should prefer not to see London under his absolute control.”

“Obviously,” Lily muttered.

“May I trust that the pair of you will find a way to recover the Moth Miraculous?”

Chat leapt to his feet, standing ramrod straight, flinging one hand up into a salute. “Yes, Sir Dumbledore, of course. Now that you’ve given us such through, detailed information, we know he can only be in one place. Ladybug and I will go take care of it at once.”

Lily’s heart wrenched. Chat was too ridiculous, too absurd by far. She really shouldn’t have liked him, especially not now, especially after all this, and yet her stupid heart wouldn’t listen to good, common sense. All her hands wanted was to go over and bury her fingers in Chat’s alleycat hair.

But he didn’t want that. He definitely did not want that, so she couldn’t——

She had to go. She had to get away from him, before she did something even more idiotic than flirting with an uninterested boy for eight months.

Dumbledore said, “I do enjoy choosing Miraculous holders who have a sense of humor about them.”

“Whatever.” Lily set her teacup next to the gramophone. “Thanks for your infinite wisdom and guidance, oh guardian.”

Dumbledore stood to show them out. “Take heart, Ladybug and Chat Noir. I believe you have everything you require to accomplish your task.”

“Brilliant,” Lily said under her breath, and marched out of the shop.

She flung her yo-yo around on the chimney three stories up, and retracted the cord to yank her to the roof, the cool, post-rain air a balm on her overly warm face.

Chat launched up beside her in no time. “Hey, no, hold on—would you just—” He tucked his staff behind his back with one hand, while the other reached out toward her.

She took herself a step out of reach.

“Okay,” he said. “Clearly you want to talk about this, so let’s just get it over with.”

Lily folded her arms, looking to the side. “I really don’t know what we have to talk about.”
“Oh, for fuck’s sake—you know what I’m talking about.”

“Now you’re just talking in circles.”

“Christ, Ladybug, would you just—fine. I’ll talk about it if it means we can get back to normal for finding Voldemort.”

Normal? Like she could just pretend this had never happened, that she hadn’t been so thoroughly outed and then subtly rejected?

And now it was about to get worse. She couldn’t even glance at him, not when he was about to make it perfectly clear that he while appreciated her affections, she really wasn’t the one for him—

“Look,” he said. “I don’t know why they published what they did, why they took something like two friends hanging out and turned it into—you know. You’ve got every right to be angry they assume that we’re, um, like that, but don’t take it out on me, all right? I’m brilliant, yeah, but funny enough, they still haven’t put me in charge of writing the bloody headlines. I didn’t do anything wrong here, so would you just, I dunno, fucking let it go?”

She stared at him.

The gray sky remained still and silent above them. She needed thunder here, or lightning, or anything weather-appropriate to the sheer enormity of what he’d just confessed to.

She was, truly, an idiot.

But so was he. He really didn’t know—he thought that she was, what, being friendly? What the hell did he think she got up to with her mates?

She’d thought she’d been so clear. She thought she’d been too obvious, but he honestly hadn’t put it together.

Bloody buggering fuck. It hadn’t been a rejection; it was just plain idiocy.

“Well?” he said, scratching at one ear. “Do I get an apology?”

Before she could think anything through, she took two steps forward, placed a hand on his shoulder, and kissed him.

Not angrily. Not demanding. Just…kissed him. As a statement. As an announcement. Her lips against his for one, two, three seconds. Then she stepped back, removed her hand, and gazed up at his eyes.

“You’re an idiot,” she told him.

At that point her brain caught up to the rest of her. Her eyes went wide, her limbs tingled, her stomach tried to devour itself—

She ran.

She turned tail and bolted, flying out over rooftops and cars and pavement, past windows and signs and balconies. She flew faster than Chat could ever hope to keep up with, faster than some of the birds of London, but still not fast enough to outrun the reality of what she’d just done.

They had a supervillain to catch together, and plenty of lesser villains to battle up until then, and now she’d gone and kissed him. She’d probably just ruined everything.
But she’d got to kiss him.

She’d kissed Chat Noir.

Her body was still panicking, but one not-so-small corner of her, mostly centered around her heart, was warm and sated.

It hadn’t been perfect. It hadn’t been much of anything, not when he’d been too stunned to kiss her back.

But it had been something.

What a tremendously, monumentally stupid thing to have done. She’d learned he didn’t feel that way about her, and he’d never have guessed she fancied him, but then she’d gone and kissed him! What was she thinking he’d say back? Oh, I hadn’t thought about it, but I guess I could try? He didn’t like her and now her one-sided pining was out in the open and oh, god, things would be phenomenally awkward after this.

Maybe Voldemort would give up after this and maybe she’d never have to see him again.

Maybe he’d have a heart attack, or better yet, a stroke and an accompanying change of personality.

She could only hope.

Lily’s routine had changed so many times within the past two years: after Sev moved to the hotel; after her parents died and she moved in with Petunia; after she became a model and then started at Hogwarts.

But somehow not speaking to Sev was different. He’d been the constant thread through all of that. He wasn’t the best at consoling, which was mostly what she’d needed, but he’d been there. He’d cared. He was the first one she texted in the morning, and the last one she texted at night.

Her phone grew much quieter the day she walked off on him.

Although she and Dorcas exchanged numbers at once, Dorcas was not much of a texter. She was also not much of a rambler, like Sev had been. Which was not to say she made for terrible company. She was just…different. Not what Lily was used to.

Dorcas did provide more in-class entertainment than Severus ever did. She often drew wickedly funny sketches on the side of her notes for Lily to enjoy: Lucinda Zheng dancing like an Egyptian, and Slughorn as a spider, and a very detailed one of Potter smoking pot and looking outraged.

“What do normally you do after school?” Dorcas asked, as they sat in a corner of the courtyard at lunch.

“Be a model.”

Dorcas’s face scrunched up. “That sounds boring.”

“It’s all right. It pays the bills.”

“Pay the bills—you’re so mature. Are you also going through menopause?”

“I do have many suburban white mum problems, don’t I? Keeping a tidy house, being on time to my appointments, not getting too drunk off of wine…”
“Big drinker, are you?”

“No, but they serve it at some work events. Trouble is I’m a complete lightweight.”

Dorcas laughed, and invited Lily to come hang out by Westminster Bridge after school, where Dorcas liked to sketch tourists. Lily went, and it was brilliant, and she barely even remembered how furious she was with Sev.

Or how much she missed him.

Being at school was easily the worst time for missing him, especially in classes she didn’t share with Dorcas. Sev tried to talk to her before French the next day, but then Black called him a name, which distracted him until class started.

It was hard to tell whether Black had done it to help Lily. He could have just been giving Sev the usual shit. While he and Potter left her alone after the first day, Sev still endured some awfulness from time to time, and gave it back in return.

But she didn’t have to protect him from Black and Potter. They’d mostly let up, and if Sev started anything, that was his problem.

Lily had a new friend now. A female friend, at that.

Lily hadn’t had a female friend in so long that it took her a couple of weeks to remember that there might be a few perks to it besides access to emergency tampons.

“So we’re friends now, right?” Lily asked as they sat on a bench near Westminster Bridge.

Dorcas made a noise somewhat like a grunt, but cheerier. If grunts could be cheerier, anyway.

Lily pondered this. “Do we have to do sleepovers or something now? Isn’t that what girl friends do?”

Dorcas wrinkled her nose. “D’you want to?”

“Feels like we’re a bit old, honestly.”

“Agreed.”

Dorcas bent down over her sketch of a beautiful woman with an elaborately-patterned hijab, adding some more shadowing around her nose.

“No sleepovers, fine,” Lily said. “But is girl talk on the table?”

“We’re two girls talking…so yes.”

“I meant talk about boys.”

Dorcas shot her a sidelong glance. “Why,” she said, “is it called girl talk if it’s about boys?”

“It’s not always about boys...although it usually is, isn’t it? How stupid.”

Dorcas brushed some eraser remnants off the side of her sketch pad. “Talk at me about boys if you have to. But if you’re expecting advice or anything…”

“I’m not.” Lily frowned. “I think.”
“You’re sure there’s not something else we could talk about?”

“Would you rather advise me on the whole problem of my sister blames me for my parents’ fatal car crash?”

Dorcas looked up at her, paused, and then looked back down. “So there’s a boy, then?”

That had been a bit of a low blow on Lily’s part. Still, if they were going to be better mates, it was nice to lay the groundwork for later.

“Yes,” Lily said. “There is. He doesn’t go to our school, though. He’s a, ah, modeling friend. And I see him sometimes at…modeling things. He’s just—and I’m—I can’t…” She pushed her hair off her face with both palms and made a frustrated noise.

Dorcas said, “So much for girl talk.”

“No, it’s just that I’m not—I’m not used to talking about him. I haven’t had anyone to talk to about him, really, or at least anyone who’s not”—a tiny red kwami—“met him before.”

“Mhm.”

“He’s so…clever. And brave. And funny. And god, he’s gorgeous, all right? And because of our, er, work, I get to see so much of what he looks like, and fuck, he’s just—erm. Really fit. And I shouldn’t like him. You know? Because he has this awful habit of—um, awful jokes. Just stupid dad jokes, all the time, and they’re not funny. They really aren’t.”

Lily blew out a breath. This was not nearly as cathartic as she’d hoped, not when she had to keep tweaking the details.

“And he’s…it’s like he doesn’t seem to notice me that way, you know?”

Dorcas looked up at her. “Are you joking?”

“What?”

“All the boys notice you that way. Every single straight and bi one I have ever met.”

“But this bloke doesn’t. It’s like—I started calling him this pet name, right?” Literally a pet name. God, Chat was rubbing off on her—although if only he would… “And he took it in stride. Not any sort of back and forth on it, no teasing or joking. We get to—sometimes we’re in pretty close proximity, you know, being…models. So you’d think, how could he not be thinking about snogging the daylights out of me? I mean, I am fit! I know I’m fit. And we’re touching, like, a lot of our bodies together, so much of the time, but he doesn’t so much as flirt with me…”

“Hm,” said Dorcas.

“Maybe he’s trying to be professional? Because we do have to keep working with each other.”

Dorcas nodded, erasing some of the extra sketch lines around the woman’s chin.

“So…I dunno. It’s just awful and I think if I’m not careful I’m going lose control and kiss him someday soon.”

“Kissing is nice?” Dorcas offered.

“Yes, but only if he wants to.” Lily slumped down, resting the back of her skull against the hard top
of the bench. “Do you think he really doesn’t notice me flirting? I mean, I feel like I’m basically one step short of hiring a skywriter. It’s like flirting with a rock.”

“A really fit rock, though.” Dorcas blew any remaining eraser bits off her sketch and held it up. “What do you think?”

“Beautiful, you really captured the texture on that hijab, but also, what am I going to do?”

“I told you I was shit at advice.”

Lily groaned, covering her face. “That you did. Shit. I’m just such a mess.”

“Yeah, but like…would it really be so bad if you kissed him to find out what he thinks?”

“Yes. Because right now he might like me, or he might not, and it’s like—”

“Schrödinger’s cat,” Dorcas said, and started packing away her things. “Only not a cat.”

A small, slightly hysterical laugh bubbled out of Lily. “Oh, Dorcas, you don’t even know…but yeah, that’s the idea. I can keep pretending that maybe he does like me, and is playing it like he doesn’t because of work. But if I kiss him…”

Dorcas frowned. “Heartbreak?”

“Of the worst sort. And our partnership—I mean, our working relationship… I just don’t know if I can risk it. But I want to. But if I knew he definitely didn’t like me, then I…I don’t even want to think about it.”

“I see,” said Dorcas. “Have you thought about maybe falling for someone else?”

“You really are shit at this.”

Dorcas shrugged, and stuck her pencils in her Ladybug-themed pencil case. “It’s good to know who you are. I am who I am.”

Lily gave a thin smile, and nudged her knee against Dorcas’s. “Yeah,” she said. “You are. Thanks for trying.”

It had been a long shot to try this anyway. Their friendship was so new, and Lily had to lie about so many details…but it had been months of only talking to Mary about it. Lily desperately needed a fresh perspective. Someone sensible to tell her if she should go for it, or leave it, or what.

Lily’s routines had shifted, but not, apparently, on this.

“Can we stop talking about boys now?” Dorcas asked.

“Yeah, yeah.” Lily pushed herself off the bench and turned around to offer Dorcas a hand. “Let’s go get chips.”
While James watched Ladybug swing down the street, two of his fingers drifted up to brush over his lips.

“What the fuck,” he said. “What the fuck?”

There was no one there to answer his question. No one to witness the madness that had just occurred, or to reassure James that it had in fact happened, or to confirm that she actually did fancy him.

Because she did. She had to. She’d just told him—or shown him, rather, but in any case, she’d made her point clear as fuck.

He headed straight for home, bouncing from rooftop to rooftop, barely noticing the few people on the street waving up at him. He needed to tell someone what had just happened, and Sirius was probably already in James’s room by this time on a Friday night.

He didn’t stop his journey until he reached an alley close to home where he could detransform. Once Algernon was out of the ring, floating in the air, James said, “That happened, right? That happened?”

Algernon gave his you are an idiot meow. Actually, almost all his meows had that tone, but this one in particular.

As James walked in the front door of the bakery, he remembered that Sirius’s parents had dragged him to some stupid fundraiser that night.

“Shit,” he said, and then looked over at his mum behind the till. “That wasn’t about you.”

Euphemia came around the counter to rub the top of his head, sending his hair into further disarray. “Did you remember Sirius can’t come over to play tonight?”

James’s ears burned. “I mean—no, but also, yes.”

He was lucky there weren’t any customers left at this time of day to witness his torment.

“Stuck with your mum and dad tonight, then?” She went back to packing away the extra biscuits for tomorrow’s day-old bin. “Such a tremendously difficult life you lead. We even have some of your favorite cake left.”

James clasped the back of his neck. “Yeah,” he said distractedly.

He needed to talk to someone, but who was there? He could monologue at Algernon, but that really did get old very quickly. Sirius would occasionally put up with James going on about Lily, although as he once put it: “I would literally rather watch white paint dry in a bare room while listening to the old dial-up tone on repeat.”

That left precious few options for the moment.

He went to stand in front of the shop window, examining the handful of cupcakes left on a three-
“Oh dear,” said Euphemia. “Something bad, eh?”

She came over and picked up a lemon cupcake for herself, while James worked on swallowing the massive amount of frosting he’d just shoved in his mouth.

“Come tell mummy all about it.” She drew him by the arm to the lone table near the door. “Sit,” she said, and James sank into the chair across from her. “Now. What’s happened?”

“She kissed me,” he said, staring forlornly down at his frosting-less cupcake. What an unwise move that had been—now he just had cake. Phenomenal cake, sure, but frosting-less cake all the same.

“Oho. Who kissed you? Lily? Oh, no, was she awful? Slobbery?”

“I wish,” James sighed. “I would take a slobbery kiss from her in a heartbeat.”

“And it wasn’t that Hodge girl who forced herself on you?”

“No, it was—um, some other girl at school.”

Euphemia’s dark grey eyebrows shot up. “See, this is what happens when kids become teenagers. They stop telling their mums things, and then I’m stuck in the dark wondering who’s gone and kissed my boy.”

“I tell you almost everything.”

“Yes, it’s that ‘almost’ part I’m working on.”

“I don’t want to say who it was because, um, reasons.”

Her hazel eyes lit up. “Mystery girl. I do like a mystery. Tell me all about it.”

“All right, well she—it’s complicated. She’s always been, um, around. You know? And, ah, sometimes we partner together on projects in class. Work really well together, actually.”

“Wendy?”

“Mum, stop. No guessing, all right? And no, it’s not Wendy. God. She’s so high maintenance.”

“I’m sorry, keep going. Eat some cake.”

James took an obligatory bite, swallowed, and continued. “Right. Well. She sometimes made…uh. Comments. That I really should have seen…but how could I have known she liked me for real? I mean, honestly, I’m—well, terrific, but I never thought she meant any of it, and then she got all angry when the new—student, there’s a new student, was all, you two are an item, and I was like, no, we’re not, and anyway then she kissed me.”

“The new student?”

James started to stand up. “Nope, this isn’t working—”

“James.”

He dropped back down with a sigh. “Fine. Not the new girl. Partner girl. She kissed me.”
“And?”

“And then she ran away, and I came home, and I ate the best part of this cupcake first, which was so stupid—”

“She ran off?”

“Well—yeah.”

“Odd move, although I’ve certainly done that one before, so I sympathize with the impulse.”

“The point is, Mum, she fancies me. Like, really fancies me!”

“And you’re in love with Lily.”

“Yeah, so, it’s just…a mess.”

His cupcake was gone by now, and he poked at the empty paper wrapper. Euphemia slid her uneaten cupcake across the table to him.

“Well,” she said. “That is a predicament. What are you going to do?”

James paused. “Could we move to Italy? Tonight?”

“You’ve got to say something to her.”

“Like what, thanks, that was nice?”

“Was it?”

“Um—yeah. I mean, it was better than the first time we—er, the first time I’d thought about it. Yeah, that’s it. Thought about it.”

“I’m letting that lie slide because I don’t want you to run off.”

“Cheers.”

Euphemia sat back in her seat, tucking her hands behind her head. “Well, as far as I see it… The Lily thing has been going on, what, six months?”

“Nearly nine.”

“And she’s still not really…into you.”

He, of course, had never told his mum about a certain peck on the cheek he’d given Lily Evans. Not that Lily knew it had been James Potter doing it. James knew there was hope—that she was at least superficially interested in some small piece of him, even if she didn’t connect it with him personally…

“She talked to me the other day,” he said. “About—er, something unimportant. And she smiled at me that other time.”

“I recall.”

“So…um. It’s not going that well. But also, it’s not not going well. I’m making progress.”

“You don’t have to stick with your first love, you know. Especially if she doesn’t feel the same way.
You’re allowed to move on.”

“Are you saying I should go for—um, partner girl? Because she fancies me?”

“Is she all right? I know you’ve had Lily blinders on, but honestly, dear, the Potter obsession thing can be a little hampering.”

“Dad never gave up on you.”

“And quite rightly, too, but you might also remember that he was so busy trying to get my attention that he failed his last chemistry exam.”

“And lost out on that job, yeah, I know. But I can’t just give up on Lily like that. I’m not a robot, Mum. I can’t flip a switch and say, beep borp, I’m not in love with Lily Evans anymore.”

“You’re the son of two brilliant scientists, and that’s what you think a robot sounds like. You have Siri on your bloody phone, James. Honestly.”

James rolled his eyes.

“As I was saying, though,” she said, “I think it’s worth considering this other girl. Not that you have to marry her, or god forbid knock her up right now, but don’t rule her out, is all I’m saying. I like a girl who makes the first move.”

“Then you can have her.”

She tapped a hand on the table and stood up. “My motherly advice has officially been dispensed. You’re welcome, and you owe me two quid.”

James grumbled and reached into his pocket.

All she’d really said was think about it, which he would’ve done anyway. He couldn’t not think about it, not with memories of her soft lips pelting his mind every free second. His thoughts kept him up half the night, going through every chaton, every innuendo, every implied comment that she wanted to make out with him—all right, so he’d been pretty damn oblivious.

But it was Ladybug. That was how she was. And he was Chat Noir, and they were partners, and there was Lily in the mix, and it was actually a miracle that he got any sleep at all that night.

It was lucky he got some, though, because at half ten, his phone woke him up. Some evil villain named Wingman at the Tower of London had taken control of all the city’s birds. Traffic was at a standstill. Dozens of people had been doused in bird poo. London was in a panic. So the usual, really, just at the most inconvenient time.

The lone photo so far of Wingman showed a wizened, white-haired man wearing one of the antiquated Beefeater costumes. It had the standard, ridiculous top hat and belted jacket, only with the navy and red bits inverted. The Tower’s ravenmaster gets bats in his belfry, read the caption.

“Fucking brilliant,” James said, staring bleary-eyed at his phone. “I finally get to be a superhero, and these are the types of villains I’m battling.”

Algernon was still curled up in the mixing bowl stuffed with soft cloth that he slept in. James reached under his bed and poked at him, earning an annoyed yowl.

“Come on, then. We’ve got to go do our thing with some bloke who clearly doesn’t know what
It took until halfway through the transformation, when the suit was coalescing around his legs, for his brain to properly wake up.

He pressed his glove-covered palm to his forehead. What the hell was he going to say to Ladybug? Voldemort really had the worst timing.

All the same, there was no staying home sick from fighting evil. James had no choice—he’d just have to suck it up and go.

“Fuuuuuck,” he muttered, bouncing in place, scrambling to prepare any sort of statement to give Ladybug.

But there was no time for this, and no words seemed right, and he had to go.

“Fuck it,” he said, and raced up to the rooftop patio to set off across London. His stomach growled as he leapt from building to building, both from hunger—he should’ve grabbed a croissant or something—and from dread.

This was just a clusterfuck waiting to happen. He knew it.

He found Ladybug fending off Wingman in the Tower courtyard. As they’d learned with Silvia Dodgson, though, flying objects were tricky to battle, and this villain offered a new, unpleasant twist to the mix. James had swung his staff at the books without issue, but the thought of slamming his metal weapon into a live bird turned his already upset stomach.

So there was that problem, and the part where his brain, normally occupied at this stage with strategizing an attack, was stuck on a litany of *fuck fuck fuck what do I say to her*.

And also, *damn she is very fit indeed*.

“Oh, Bugger,” he whispered. “Fucking focus, James.”

He leaped into battle without thinking, which was the first in a series of awful events. His landing on the grass startled Ladybug enough that she didn’t fully dodge a dive-bombing raven. Wingman might not have had the power to choose a better villain name, but he had been able to fix his precious ravens’ clipped wings. She cried out as a sharp beak tried to tear at her shoulder.

James knocked the raven away with his staff, shuddering at the sickening crunch.

Things progressed poorly from there. Every time he stepped forward, she stepped back. He lost track of where she was and banged his staff into her shin. She shot her yo-yo at a roof, but misread the direction of James’s jump, and accidentally twined her yo-yo around his feet.

It didn’t help that he couldn’t quite look at her directly. He couldn’t forget that she had *bloody kissed him*, that she *wanted* him, that her lithe body, so often pressed against his, was now officially on offer.

Just when their pathetic efforts finally brought James onto the flat roof of the Tower to confront Wingman, a swarm of birds swept Wingman off the ground and began flying him away.

Ladybug shouted a direction from the ground eight stories down. James only heard about half of it, but did what he thought she wanted. He launched himself into the air with his staff, preparing to grab hold of Wingman’s feet, one hand outstretched—
Her yo-yo smacked into the back of his staff-bearing hand.

He cursed. His hand spasmed open.

His precious staff plummeted toward the Tower roof, while James continued to soar through the air, his heart now a frantic hummingbird in his chest as he calculated his trajectory and how he would soar over the edge of the Tower roof and eventually slam onto the ground—

His body knew enough to save itself. His hand reached out and grabbed a turret spire as he flew past it, his shoulder yanking painfully as his body swung around the pole, his momentum redirected. He grimaced and pulled his feet in toward the spire, where they scrambled to find purchase on a ball at the base.

Fuck, that had been close. He’d nearly fallen to his death—

But something nearly as awful now loomed in a much more horrendous way: five enormous Tower ravens dove toward him from all sides.

He whimpered. If he stayed up here, the birds would peck him horribly. If he jumped the three stories down to the Tower roof, he’d have broken limbs, and then the birds would peck him horribly. It really wasn’t a choice at all.

He swung his head around, trying to find Ladybug and praying she would save him, but she was still down in the courtyard. She was whipping her yo-yo into an overhead shield while she raced toward the Tower, her free hand swatting at a pair of ravens.

She would never get to him in time.

James was able to knock off the first couple of ravens that landed on his shoulder, but one of his arms was clinging to the spire, and soon enough he had to use his other to protect his eyes.

His suit kept their enormous beaks from breaking open most of his skin, but that didn’t stop them from pecking away with brutal, bruising strength. One started going for the back of his head, and he uttered some noises that he was not ashamed of because it fucking hurt fuck fuck fuck—

“Catch!” shouted Ladybug.

He lifted his arm to see his staff soaring up toward him, where Ladybug had expertly hurled it from the Tower roof.

He had to lean sideways stretch for it. The raven on his arm chose that moment to try to bite off one of his fingers where it wrapped around the spire.

James cried out. In slow motion, he watched his hand fly open in shock, watched as his fingers lost their grip on the one thing keeping him in place.

In some ways, falling was so familiar to him, the way air rushed up his nose and into his ears and through his hair, but he usually had his trusty staff with him to turn it into flying.

He closed his eyes as one shoulder rammed into the top edge of the turret, sending him spinning, his mouth firing off all sorts of desperate curses as he tumbled through the air.

He was going to die, he was going to die, but it was okay, he told himself, Ladybug’s magic would bring him back in the end, it was just that he expected dying was going to hurt a lot a lot a lot—
An arm wrapped around his torso, yanking him sideways.

“Ohthankgod,” he breathed.

This was not the first time Ladybug had pulled him out of a fall like this, but as he opened his eyes, he realized he’d never been within one story of the ground before.

And she’d never dropped him before, but she did now.

Not intentionally—she’d got a bad grip on him, and he was heavy, and he fell through the air once more.

His instincts kicked in, ignoring all the existing pain to focus on loosening his muscles, bending his knees, and landing relatively smoothly on his feet. He slid sideways across the gravel, his arms flung out for balance, rocks flying up in his wake.

He tumbled as he lost momentum, fortunately onto his good shoulder, and rolled onto his back from there. His knees ached from the landing, his shoulder screamed, and the ripped-open wounds on the back of his head pulsed dangerously.

He would have loved to have just lain there and had even a second to catch his breath, but the birds would descend on him again if he didn’t get moving. He was dreading the thought of sitting up when Ladybug bent over him.

Her brilliant green eyes scanned over his body, assessing the damage. His heart settled a little. He was a mess, but his lady was here. He would be all right.

She swore profusely, but did so while picking James up, her arms supporting his knees and back. James managed to link his arms around her neck with only a moderate twinge in his shoulder.

She ran with him into the crown jewel building and laid him down gently on the floor.

“Oh, chaton,” she whispered, brushing the hair off his forehead to examine a bleeding gash. “I’m sorry, this is all my fault.”

Ideally, he would have told her something like, “I don’t blame you, it’s fine, and also, the fastest way for me to not be in so much pain is for you to go purify this fucking akuma and use the energy to send everything, including me, back to normal.”

But all he managed was, “I’m okay. Go get him.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, and then forced herself upright. “Of course,” she said. “On it.”

There wasn’t much for James to do after she left besides whimper and hope he wasn’t losing too much blood. His only thoughts were of how much every part of him hurt, and how much he bloody hated birds. Fucking birds, with their unnatural flight abilities and creepy, unblinking eyes. He was never giving one a bread crumb ever again.

It wasn’t a very insightful period of his life, but hating on birds served as a decent distraction every time his brain started reliving the horror of being pecked.

It took Ladybug ten more minutes to send off the pink healing light across London. The Miraculous magic swept into the building to wipe away all traces of James’s injuries, leaving nothing but a faint tingling sensation in their place.
He allowed himself a sigh of sweet relief, a moment to savor his blessedly intact body, and then jumped to his feet. He made it two steps out the front door before something tried to tackle him—he started reaching for his staff, but it was still on the ground somewhere—and then he realized it was just a bone-crushing hug from Ladybug.

“You’re okay,” she was saying, her warm face pressed against his neck. “You’re okay you’re okay you’re okay—”

He breathed out a soft laugh. “You saved the day as always, my lady.”

In tandem, they both stiffened.

Ladybug quickly unwrapped herself from him, her face glowing red. “Sorry,” she said. “I’m so sorry, like unbelievably sorry, about today, and about causing today, it was all my fault, I’m such an idiot—”

James’s hand closed around the back of his neck. “No, um…”

He still hadn’t thought of what to say to her. *Thanks for the kiss, but I’m not sure about you yet, I’m kind of in love with someone else but she barely notices me, so maybe I should fall for you instead?*

“I wasn’t ready to see you,” he blurted. “But only because—I didn’t think you’d—I never thought —”

“Yeah, no, obviously you didn’t, which was why I, er, you don’t have to—”

Her earrings beeped.

“Can we talk in a couple days?” he asked desperately. “I feel like I’m going to fuck everything up if I stay here right now.”

“God yes, I need—”


“Where could we possibly go that’s private?”

“Shit, you’re right. Fuck. Um—the school,” James said. “Hogwarts, on the roof. No one’ll look for us there if there’s not an attack.”

“Brilliant. Four all right?”

“Yeah. Yeah, four’s good.”

Ladybug started taking long steps backwards. “Okay. Okay. Good. Then. See you there. Bye!” she said, and shot her yo-yo at the chimney of a courtyard home.

James heaved a deep breath, gently pressing his fingers against the formerly injured places on the back of his head.

Her magic had fixed many things, yes…but not everything. And this other problem wouldn’t be undone by a magic healing light.

The most frustrating thing about being in love was Lily Evans was knowing that he’d been doomed from the start.
He’d thought it over a million times, and there was no sequence of events he could imagine for the first few days of school that didn’t end exactly the same way. Because she’d been friends with Snape, and James had hated Snape from the first time Snape had thrown his superior nose up in the air and made some remark about James and Sirius.

Lily was Lily, which was to say a loyal friend. She was always going to defend her mates. Even if James had seen Lily’s kindness slightly earlier, he still would’ve had that feud with Snape, and she still would’ve disliked James. Snape’s enemies were hers.

Although his friends definitely weren’t.

He saw the way Snape kept snubbing Lily for the kids of Riddle’s followers. Those wankers had parents that either worked in Riddle’s administration, worked in the financial sector, or gave Riddle huge sums of money. That, or some combination of the three. James had met plenty of their kind at the various charity fundraisers his parents brought him to, but unlike his parents, theirs were all snotty pricks. They made snide remarks to each other about the Potters for spending their retirement making treats that made people happy, and donating their profits to anti-hunger campaigns.

Lily didn’t fit in with those arseholes. She worked for her money. Her accent didn’t match theirs, and neither did her view on the world.

At least, that was what James had picked up from the passionate, well-articulated arguments she made in Citizenship class about justice and governance. By Christmas holidays, his brain had developed a finely attuned sensor: ignore what everyone in class was saying, but snap to attention for the voice in the room that mattered the most. She always used it to make a brilliant point.

No cheeky remarks, though. He caught her clenching her jaw dozens of times in class, always after someone had made a particularly stupid or insensitive comment. Knowing her, she had some biting response that she had to withhold. The few times James had let himself tag distantly behind her and Snape after these events, James had caught her wit on the sly, saved only for Snape’s ears. Or, if there weren’t other people around and James had done something idiotic, James’s.

For everyone else, though, she was nothing but relentlessly kind, treating people equally regardless of their wealth. She paid for Edwin Edwards’s lunch when he forgot his wallet; complimented Silvia Dodgson’s fantastic thrift-store outfits; and asked other students to sign a card for Mr. Flitwick when his mum died. Every time James noticed her doing something like this, his heart seemed to melt, and he let out what others probably interpreted as a very longing, pathetic sigh.

It took until December for people to start returning the favor. Without Snape hanging around all the time, other students started talking to Lily. Wendy Wilde asked to sit next to her in French. Lucinda Zheng gave her one of the homemade friendship bracelets she made in detention to pass the time.

Terry Heaney bought her a pair of high heels for Christmas, but that was just Terry being creepy, and not anything related to Lily being approachable.

December was a winning month for James, too. He and Ladybug had yet to break their record of success. Sirius was staying in the Potter guest room more often than not. And to top it all off, he was still celebrating Lily’s separation from Snape.

December was also the month when he learned how wonderful it was to be on Lily Evans’s good side.

Predictably, James was not the only male student at Hogwarts celebrating Lily’s newfound freedom from Snape. He almost snapped his pencil every time he saw another boy of them giving her a
meaningful, hungry look, or asking her to tutor them in chemistry. Frustrating as it was, he knew that he had no rights to Lily, and that she could do what she damn well pleased.

Snape, however, had no such control.

The week before Christmas, James had reluctantly agreed to quiz Peter in the library before a history exam. Nick Crabtree sat two tables over with a furrowed brow, writing something with that fancy calligraphy pen he favored. He kept scratching things out, starting over, and then crumpling up the whole paper before tossing it into a nearby bin.

One of his discarded papers banked off the edge of the bin. It bounced onto the floor and then rolled over to tap against Snape’s shoe.

Snape, prick that he was, uncrumpled the paper to read Nick’s words aloud. “Eyes as green as nuclear waste, hair as red as blood—”

By that point James had launched to his feet and was three steps away from Snape.

“Leave off,” he said.

Snape stood up and regarded him coolly. “Jealousy is such a plebian sentiment.”

“Right back at you.” James reached for the paper.

Snape took a step back at the same time, holding the paper closer and continuing, “Your body reminds me of Christmas, please go out with me.” He tossed the paper to James, who caught it deftly. “Absolute drivel. Were it not for the vaunted coffers of your grandmother, Crabtree, I should worry about the standards of this very institution.”

“It’s a rough draft!” Nick cried.

“Lily has more intelligence than you have in your toenail clippings. She’d never go out with an illiterate, incompetent toad like yourself.”

Nick grabbed his pen and fled the library, his bottom lip quivering.

James looked down to see his hand was neatly wrapped in a fist, ready to sock Snape in the mouth. The thought was so, so tempting, even though McGonagall had suspended him the last time he’d hit Snape. It would be well worth it—Lily wouldn’t even care now—

But there was also the chance that James could prevent an akuma attack if he hurried.

Nick was the wronged party here. He was the one James had to care about, even if he was apparently competing for Lily’s affection.

“I hope for your sake your electricity never goes out,” James told Snape. “If you ever had to be in a room with a bunch of candles, all that grease on your face would send you right up in flames.”

He raced away to loop through the usual sad student haunts: the loo, the nook under the stairs, the big broom cupboard. But, as usual, he was too late. By the time he returned to the library, the damage had begun.

Not that Snape trapped in a glass box really counted as damage.

Peter ran over to James. “It’s Nick,” he said, wringing his hands. “He’s got a magic pen, and whatever he writes really happens!”
“That sounds terrifying,” James said, already moving backwards toward the corridor. “I’d better go, er, warn the teachers.”

“Ms. Pince already went—”

“I’ll go, too, just in case she, er, gets hurt.”

James spared a look at Snape, who was shouting furiously and silently inside his box, his fists pounding against the wall. It was a true gem of a moment, one James intended to treasure for the rest of his life.

He couldn’t have Snape asphyxiating on his watch, though, so he reluctantly sent Peter to try to tip the box sideways. Hopefully there was no bottom and Snape could escape. And even if there wasn’t, Snape would get knocked about a bit, and that was a win, too.

One trip to the loo later, Chat Noir was prowling the school.

The problem was, for someone with evil powers, Nick Crabtree really hadn’t left much of a trail. His list of injured students only totaled three. Besides Snape, James found Avery glued face-first to a classroom wall, and Rookwood stuck to a toilet. If Chat Noir hadn’t had a reputation to uphold, he’d have stopped to take pictures. Instead he kept looking.

He eventually found Nick in the chemistry lab talking to Lily. Under other circumstances, James might have planned his attack more carefully, but Lily was in danger and Nick could do anything to her, anything at all—

James rushed into the room without thinking. Nick yelped, frantically scribbling something on the piece of parchment he held. James was inches away from tackling Nick when a magic carpet appeared beneath Nick’s feet, carrying him out of James’s path.

“Until later,” Nick called to Lily as he and his plumed Shakespearean hat soared out into the corridor.

James made to go after him, but Lily’s hand settled around his wrist.

“Don’t worry about getting him,” she said, drawing James closer to her.

He went willingly, suppressing the whimper that threatened to emerge at Lily touching him so gently. Or at least most of the whimper.

“Er, hi,” he said. “Person I don’t know. How, ah, are you doing this fine evening? Um, afternoon?”

She gave him a curious, amused look. “Fine, thank you. But you don’t have to chase him. I agreed to go out with him later.”

Her hand was still touching him and his heart was surely going to beat itself right through his ribs and out into the open—

“You what?”

Lily quirked her eyebrows and removed her hand. “Don’t tell me the great Chat Noir is old-fashioned enough to be upset that a girl is going on a date.”

“You think I’m great?”

“Do I need a laser pointer to get you to pay attention to the point?”
“Oh, um, no. I’m, er. Totally with you. I don’t care if girls date, but him? You know, um, an akumatized bloke. Really, you seem nice, and, er, not bad looking, I think you could do a little better —”

“You mad cat. You might always chase your own mice, but the rest of us lowly mortals are stuck putting out traps.”


She flashed him a smile. “I just try to live up to your fantastic model.”

“You—you do?” James coughed. “That’s…uh, brilliant. I mean, I do try to be a good role model for other people. Not everyone can have a Miraculous, you know.”

“Oh, I do, Chat Noir. I do know. You’re very special.”

“I am, aren’t I? But you—I mean, you came up with that trap plan in no time at all.”

“Yes, well, Nick’s a sweet boy. Terrible with words, but he’s got a good heart. I figured it would be safe to let him run loose for a while. He doesn’t seem like much of a threat.”

“He already got his revenge, based on what I saw on my way here. And I’ve got to say, considering his powers are actually pretty strong, he really wasn’t that inventive.”

“He could use with some more imagination. Trust me, I’ve read his compositions in English.”

“All the same, we should get that pen out of his hands soon. I’d hate to see him use it against you, unimaginative or not.”

“So you can focus when you want to, hm?” She tilted her head. “Seems you just need the right… motivation. That’s good to know.”

James was hypnotized by the fluid shift of her long, glossy waves of hair.

“Um,” he said absently, “yes. That’s, um… spot on. What were you saying?”

“Are you feeling all right?”

The back of that soft hand came up to press against his forehead.

James did a frankly terrible job of suppressing his automatic noise response that time. If he wasn’t mistaken, it bordered on a purr.

He decided he could die right then and there.

“You’re awfully warm,” she said. “Maybe you should let Ladybug handle this.”

“No!” said James, taking a step back. “No, I’ve totally got this under control.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to come back to my place and have some soup? Maybe rest up a little?”

James brain short-circuited.

“I—” he said in a high-pitched voice. “I would really—there’s literally nothing—that’s so…”
But of course he had to go back to class. Not to mention if he actually did end up in Lily’s bedroom today, he would spontaneously combust from joy, and where would that leave him?

Well, dead and happy, but that wasn’t really how he’d planned his day out that morning.

He sighed. “I regretfully decline. But, you know, not because of you, it’s the superhero thing, you see—”

Her lips dipped into a smile. “You mean you don’t want to go home with a girl who’s ‘not bad looking?’”

“Did I say that? I mean, um, you know, as the superhero of London, I’m not supposed to show favoritism, and, erm—”

“Such a sensitive kitty. Who’d’ve thought?” She patted his cheek. “Don’t worry, my body confidence is through the roof. You’ve done no harm.”

Once more, James had no words to share, not when his mind was crashing again. She’d now touched him three times, three—his heart was hammering so hard that he was actually going to have a heart attack any moment now, he could feel it—

“Your loss,” she went on. “But at least I’ll see you tonight. He asked me to show up at seven at the docks by Tower Bridge. Tail us from there, and I’ll get his pen and toss it to you.”

He had to say something. Anything. Literally any words—

“Ladybug will want to be involved, too, you know.”

Great. He’d brought up another girl. He was the definition of smooth.

“Oh. Right.” Lily frowned. “She’ll need to purify the akuma… Well, I’ll get you the pen for safekeeping, and whenever she shows up, you can give it to her. D’you think you’ll be able to talk to her before tonight?”

“If she shows up soon, yeah, maybe. But I’ve got to get back to my life before anyone notices I’ve been gone too long.”

“Well—we’ll figure it out. Because we’re a team, yeah?” she said with an impish grin.

“Anything you want,” he blurted.

“Don’t make me a promise you can’t keep.”

She winked at him and strolled out of the classroom, leaving James in a metaphorical puddle behind her.

She’d honest to god winked at him.

Was James hallucinating? He had to be. That wink—those lingering touches—those comments—James was no expert, but he was about sixty-eight percent confident she’d been flirting with him.

Flirting with James.

Well. With Chat Noir.
And James was Chat Noir.

She fancied him! Or, at least, the very limited version of his superhero persona that she’d probably read about in news articles. But that was something. That was good. That showed promise for him, right?

His staff beeped. Part of the casing slid down to reveal a tiny screen with Ladybug’s face, and James held the staff up like a phone.

“I was starting to worry,” he said with a grin.

“I’ll have to start being fashionably late, then, to get you thinking about me more.”

“Think on this: the villain already ran off. We don’t need you at the school, so if you were on your way, you can turn back.”

“Don’t tell me you learned how to purify an akuma on your own. What will anyone need me for?”

“We’re a double-act. You know I wouldn’t do this alone.”

“Wouldn’t you?”

“Well, maybe. But it’d be much less fun.”

“I know lots of other ways to have fun. Want a list?”

“Tell me about them tonight at the docks by Tower Bridge. A civilian is luring the victim there at seven.”

“Seven tonight? Oh, I really can’t make that, Chat. There’s a normal life thing I absolutely can’t miss. But I should be able to get out of it by half past. Think you can manage things until then?”

“With this particular civilian helping out,” James said, “I think we’ve got it more than covered.”

The remainder of a school day after an akuma attack was always such a wash from an academic perspective. Today the teachers were especially distracted, what with trying to unstick two students before classes let out. This worked out in James’s favor because he was able to reminisce about the soft touch of Lily’s hand, and argue with himself about whether she’d actually flirted with him.

He got so caught up talking it through with Algernon that night that he was two minutes late to his rendezvous. He landed on the roof of a hotel on the marina, and spotted Lily on the boardwalk below, wearing a red pea coat and white furry earmuffs. She subtly looked up in James’s direction and tapped a finger on the side of her nose.

She really was cut out for this, wasn’t she? Amazing. She was just amazing.

Nick showed up in his garish purple outfit and that stupid fucking hat. He seemed oblivious to the people taking photos of him and snickering, too focused on Lily.

James couldn’t blame him.

Lily followed him toward a boat, leaning in toward him as they walked and talking softly. She kept smiling, which would have sent off James’s jealous impulses if he hadn’t known it was a ruse. But it was fine. It was.

James tensed as Nick jotted down some words on parchment, but it only brought the boat engine
roaring to life.

He really did lack imagination. He didn’t even think to create his own vessel. If all Nick intended to do as a villain was steal a boat and bother Snape, then James was tempted to leave him akumatized permanently.

After making sure Nick wasn’t a threat to Lily, or worse, getting handsy with her, James darted up the river ahead of them. He clung to the underside of Southwark Bridge, and as the boat passed under him, Lily said she wanted to write something in return for Nick. It took a second of finagling, but she successfully plied the pen out of Nick’s hands and tossed it up in the air, where it met neatly with James’s palm.

Nick hadn’t so much as mentioned the Miraculouses up until then, but once James had his pen, Nick started shouting about how he was going to yank that ring right off of James’s finger.

Again, thoroughly uncreative. James was glad he didn’t have to do English peer reviews with him.

Nick didn’t look like he’d prioritize hurting Lily over Chat Noir, but James didn’t give him the chance. He flipped up to the top of the bridge, leveraged the middle of his staff against the edge of the railing, and extended one end out to hang directly above Lily’s head.

“Hold on!” he said.

She didn’t hesitate in grabbing hold, swinging herself up and on top of the staff. James retracted it back to pull her up to the bridge.

She gracefully climbed over the railing.

“My hero,” she said with a smile. “Do I get a reward for helping?”

Without looking down, he leaned one arm against the green and gold railing. It had rained and then cooled down, though, so his arm slid right off the ice and almost made him trip.

Once he’d righted himself, he said, “A reward, eh? Did you have something in mind?”

She stepped closer to him, until their chests were almost touching, and tilted her face up at him.

“I’m sure if we really worked at it,” she said in a low voice, “that we could come up with something mutually rewarding.”

Although his heart kept racing, the frenzy in James’s brain went eerily calm. It was very clear what was going to happen next—she’d lift up on her toes, and brush her lips over his, and he was going to kiss Lily. Fucking. EVANS!

Was his life really that easy?

The answer, of course, was no.

His conscience squirmed. He couldn’t kiss Lily if she didn’t know who he really was. If she ever found out he was Chat Noir, and that he’d let her kiss James Potter, she’d quietly and efficiently drown him in the Thames.

And there was the part where…well, it wasn’t real. She didn’t know Chat Noir. Maybe she’d seen the brief interviews he gave after akuma attacks, maybe she followed the fan blogs, but she didn’t know him. He was a celebrity. Any knowledge she had of him was perforce shallow, and that meant
any kiss he got would be equally shallow in meaning.

*Fuck.*

He was saved from the awkwardness of having to turn down a kiss when Nick Crabtree ran his stolen boat full-steam into a pier full of tourists.

James and Lily both whipped their heads toward the river, automatically separating from each other.

“Finally,” James said, “some imagination.”

She shoved him lightly without taking her eyes off the scene. “Don’t encourage him.”

“Ladybug should be here soon. She can fix everything.”

“Yeah,” Lily sighed. “She can.” She turned back toward James, looking forlorn. “I’d better get home, and you’d better go fish those people out of the water before they get hypothermia.”

James sighed, too. “I s’pose so. Guess this is goodbye, then.”

“Yeah.” Her lips twitched. “Guess this is goodbye.”

They stared at each other for a moment, both clearly at a loss for what would be appropriate—a handshake? A fist bump? What did other people do after they succeeded at stuff? He and Ladybug always high-fived…

There was, of course, one other option. One she probably wouldn’t be so annoyed about later, if she learned who he was, and one she could enjoy in the meantime.

Sirens wailed behind them on the water, growing nearer. If he was going to do something, he had to make it quick—

He bent down and pecked her on the cheek.

“Good luck with everything,” he said.

If he wasn’t mistaken, there was a distinct tinge to her cheeks that was not from the cold. “Funny,” she said. “I thought black cats were the ones who needed luck.”

“Nah,” he said, climbing up onto the railing. “I’ve got all the luck in the world.”

He stepped backwards off the bridge, saluting Lily, and dropped down to land on top of the police boat speeding toward the wreckage.

He caught a glimpse of her laughing as the boat carried him away.

She might not be in love with James. Not yet, anyway. But she liked some side of him.

For now, that’d be more than enough to sustain him.

Chapter End Notes

Someone else drew Lily as Ladybug! You guys are killing me.
Thanks for all your wonderful reviews! You're keeping me motivated as I'm editing the ending chapters.
Chapter 8

There was no more wondering for Lily about whether Chat Noir knew how she felt. Instead her wondering now centered on why the fuck did she do that and why the hell had she ruined their perfectly good partnership?

Because of her, those monstrous Tower ravens had got a free shot at shredding Chat Noir. She’d been able to undo the physical damage, but she was willing to bet he’d have nightmares for months, and it was entirely her fault. She’d fucked up their rhythm. She’d been selfish and stupid and had kissed Chat Noir. And in plain sight, too, where anyone could have seen them! Anyone could’ve snapped a picture and posted it to the blogs for Chat Noir’s continued embarrassment.

They hadn’t so far, which was a small relief, but that didn’t mean someone wasn’t hoarding it for a better moment.

And then there’d been that awkward moment after she hugged him, that stilted conversation… Whatever he’d been feeling post-kiss, it was definitely not good. She was lucky that he’d shown up at all, given how distracted and uncomfortable he’d been. Not that she’d been much better in the fight—she couldn’t stop straining to see any sign from him about what he thought, couldn’t stop panicking after things had started off wrong.

She’d fucked up so badly.

After the battle against the Tower ravenmaster, Lily stepped into the shower, turned on the hot water until it scalded, and let her forehead bang against the tiled wall. She stood there until the water ran tepid, replaying all the awful moments of the day in her head, and, just to torture herself, the precious few seconds when she’d kissed him.

Watching Chat live out a Hitchcockian horror had not been worth a brief, one-sided kiss.

She spent the afternoon snuggled on her bed under all the blankets she could find, while Mary rested on the pillow next to her.

“He needs more time,” Mary said. “Then he’ll come around. I can feel it.”

“Why didn’t I just wait until after we’d beat Voldemort?” Lily said. “It shouldn’t take us that long now, right? Now that we’re trying? And if Petunia does take me out of London, then there’s no chance for us anyway, and there was no point in kissing him—”

“You acted with your heart.” Mary smiled. “That’s never a bad thing, Lily. I promise.”

Because Lily only had the energy to pull a blanket over her head, she did not tell Mary that that sounded like overly optimistic bullshit.

She called in sick to her photo shoot on Sunday so she could wallow in bed. She knew she should be scheming up ways to find Voldemort, but she couldn’t even manage to go downstairs for real food. Instead she ransacked Mary’s biscuit stash, spilling crumbs all over her sheets.

Eventually that wasn’t enough, though, and by early afternoon she dragged herself out of bed. The mirror showed her one very hot mess. One hot pathetic mess.

Pathetic was not a word she normally associated with herself. But one stray kiss to a boy, and here she was, disheveled and despairing.
This was not the Lily Evans way. Lily Evans had gone through worse. Lily Evans had saved herself from misery. She’d earned herself a better life and found herself better friends, and she’d had enough pining over a boy dim enough to miss that she loved him.

Lily Evans also knew herself well enough to understand that she still needed to process everything. She was someone who needed to talk things through, who needed feedback, even if she chose to ignore it.

Only one person had proven up to the job lately.

Going back was sheer lunacy. If nothing else, it was mad to ask a boy about another boy. But it was still less mad than kissing Chat Noir, so surely it wouldn’t do much harm, right? Worst case scenario, Potter shared her secrets with a reporter, but that seemed really unlikely. Even if he did, it wouldn’t matter. She’d already massively fucked up with Chat. She couldn’t see how she could make things any worse.

Besides, if she didn’t tell someone everything soon, she was going to burst. This was too much to be swirling through one person’s head. She had to get it out or it would eat her up.

She stole into the kitchen for a sandwich, argued briefly with Petunia, and raced out the front door. Her trusty yo-yo brought her frantic form across London in no time.

She landed silently a few roofs down and crept forward, trying to see if Potter was even outside. As it turned out, he was on the rooftop patio again, but this time not alone. His mates sat there with him, the four of them laughing madly, Remus doubled-over with his arms across his stomach.

Shit. She hadn’t come up with any sort of contingency plan for this.

She ducked down behind the neighbor’s roof, but not quickly enough. Black’s eyes latched onto hers.

She flipped onto her back and reached for her yo-yo, as Black said loudly, “Oi, James, didn’t your parents want you to take out the rubbish?”

Lily paused in her movement.

“You liar,” Potter said. “You told me you smoked the last of our stash two weeks ago, and yet here you are, clearly high on something—”

“Right. I give up. I don’t know why I bother when you’re so thoroughly hopeless.”

A glass clinked against the table. “If this is a joke about me being trash—”

“Go down to the fucking back of the building, James.”

“Are you serious?”

“Christ, I wish not.”

Potter grumbled, but there were footsteps.

“Bloody weirdo,” he muttered.

Lily sat petrified for a moment. If Black knew that she’d want to talk to Potter alone, then Potter must have told him about her visit—what if he’d told Black everything? Maybe she’d overestimated
Potter’s discretion.

She couldn’t disappear now, though, not when Black had seen her. Not when Potter would be downstairs waiting for her.

Shit. Nothing for it, then.

She stole across the rooftop and rappelled down to the ground, landing next to the bakery’s back door. It took a few seconds for her to realize that she hadn’t thought through how she would start the conversation, and then the door opened.

Potter stepped outside. He looked left, then right—

His arms flailed. “Ladybug,” he yelped. “You’re, er, back.”

She tugged on her ponytail. “Is that all right?”

“Ummmm…”

Not once in the nine months they’d known each other had she ever seen Potter so completely flummoxed. That was even considering he was basically a mess whenever she was around, presumably because he didn’t like her much. He was never Potter-normal when talking to her. Things were supposed to be different when she was Ladybug, but apparently not today.

“I’m sorry,” she said, taking a step backwards. “This was stupid. Go back to your friends, and I’ll…just go.”

He flung out a hand toward her. “Wait, no, don’t—shit.” He wrenched the hand back and pressed it against his forehead. “I’m just, er, totally shocked. That you’d come here again. Since, um…last time I really didn’t, er, help you much.”

“What? No, you helped. I mean, if you’ve come up with a brilliant plan to keep me in London, let me know, but I didn’t…I just…needed someone to talk to.”

“And what,” he asked slowly, lowering his hand, “do you need to talk about this time?”

“It’s, ah…personal.”

Potter tried to hold back a wince, but she caught the trace edges of it.

“Never mind,” she said. “I’m an idiot—you don’t know me—”

“Fuck, no, you’re not—you’re brilliant—but like, do you really not have anyone else to talk to?” he asked, his eyes frantically scanning her face. “I mean, couldn’t you talk to literally anyone else?”

Her heart ached. Because she had to admit, looking down at her feet, “No.”

He exhaled heavily. “Fuck.”

“Forget it. I’ll figure it out, I’ve just been cooped up with only myself to talk to, and I’m no help to myself, and—and it’s fine. Really. Never mind.”

“I mean, I’m really, really not someone other people go to for advice. And I’m extra unqualified to help you, of all people…but if I’m really all you have…”

He frowned, like he couldn’t quite believe that.
Her face heated. She was desperate, wasn’t she, to put up with this excruciating conversation. She really should have just left.

“All right.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Uh, let me check the back room and make sure my parents aren’t in there.”

“Inside?”

“I’m sorry, did you want to do this next to a wheelie bin where anyone could walk by?”

“No…Right. Okay.”

“Back in a mo’,” he said, and disappeared into the bakery.

Lily traced her finger around the edge of her yo-yo. This was it, then—her last chance to leave unannounced. Potter would probably, and accurately, figure she’d got too embarrassed.

But then he was back, and gesturing her inside. Her feet carried her in. She caught a glimpse of the bakery, and a grey-haired woman adjusting the front window display, before Potter tugged her into a walk-in pantry.

Fluorescent lighting shone dully overhead. Wire shelving hugged the walls, packed tightly with paper sacks of flour and sugar and cocoa. A green broom sat propped in a corner.

She was in a closet with James Potter. Severus would flip his lid if he knew.

“So,” Potter said, standing slightly further from her from her than social norms dictated. “This, um. Personal matter.”

“Um, yes.”

“What’s it all about, then?”

Lily’s hand clasped her other arm. “It’s about. Um. A boy.”

It took two seconds for Potter’s brown skin to turn as red as she’d ever seen it. “Er,” he said.

“I know, I know, but this is—it’s so complicated because it’s, er—”

“Are you sure you want to talk to me about this? I mean, really, I’m just…no, fuck, we covered this, there is no one else…fuck.”

“I can’t talk to anyone else because the boy is—well—it’s Chat Noir.”

Somehow, impossibly, his face flushed even further.

“And no one knows I’m Ladybug so I can’t tell anyone what’s going on and Chat…”

“You, er, fancy him,” Potter managed. “And so you can’t, ah, talk to him.”

“Exactly. So here I am, completely stuck. And going mad because I’ve—well, I should start at the beginning, shouldn’t I, I’m so—”

“Hold on, would you just—gimme a second.”

Potter grabbed an empty bucket off a shelf, set it upside-down on the floor, and sank down onto it.
Then he removed his glasses, rubbed his hand over his eyes, and set his glasses back on his nose.

She really shouldn’t have come, he looked as uncomfortable as if he’d sat on a cactus, this was such a poor life choice—

“This is really weird for me,” he said, “okay? So. I think if you really need someone to talk to about this…then I need this to be a two-way street. All right?”

“How…how do you mean?”

His face hadn’t lessened its shade at all. “I mean—I’ve got to tell you stuff back.”

“You don’t have to do that—don’t feel like you have to share anything—”

“It’s not about you, it’s about me. I’ll feel…better about it. If it’s not just you spilling your secrets.”

This was dangerous, this was stupid—but if that was what it took…

“All…right,” she said.

He took a deep breath. “Okay, then. Again, just doing this because you have absolutely no one else, and I can’t send you away looking so…er. Yeah. So, ah. What’s going on?”

She took a deep breath, too, and began.

Her story came out haltingly at first. It was a long story now, a months-long one, one that she’d never told anyone in full. She’d always used code words and frameworks and whatever other nonsense she needed to disguise the details. But now…now she could go through everything.

The story poured out more and more easily. And god, it felt amazing. At last she had the chance to share the complete version, including the all-important identities—or lack thereof—and the photo and the kiss and the fight and the utter predicament she found herself in.

All of it was out there. All of it was in someone else’s head.

“And it was awful yesterday,” she said, “we were so out of sync, and he could have been hurt so much worse—he could have died, if he hadn’t caught that spire—and it’s my fault. And we’ve got to stop Voldemort. And I’m…I’ve fucked us over royally. It’s all my fault we’re so broken and Voldemort’s going to win because I couldn’t keep it in my bloody trousers!”

Potter had barely said a word during any of this. He’d gone red in the face again several times, coughed several others, and choked once when she’d gone on ad nauseam about how brilliant Chat was. But he hadn’t said a word.

He kept his silence now, one corner of his mouth sucked in where he was biting at it.

She’d talked too long. She’d said too much. She’d just dumped this whole fiasco on a civilian—

Potter cleared his throat. “So…er. You really fancy him,” he said. “Like…a lot. I mean, I know lots of people who want Ladybug and Chat to get together, yeah, but this…who knew that you, er…”

“I know.”

“I…I don’t know what to say.”

How unfair was it for her to show up and expect him to fix what she couldn’t? He couldn’t exactly
rehash the same stuff he’d said to Bonnie Grogan here. He was a teenage boy, just as inept as her at this stuff—or maybe worse, what did she know…

“You don’t have to say anything,” she said quickly. “I just…needed to vent, really. I made a huge mistake and I’m tired of pining and wallowing and I just needed to get this all out of my system…”

He scrubbed a hand through his hair. “I want to say something…but all I can think of is, well, fuck.”

“I know.”

“That’s, like, a phenomenally huge mess you’re in there. Surprised you can poke your head over the top of it, to be honest.”

“Barely. Barely at all.”

“Yeah, that’s…I mean wow.”

“Yeah.”

He wasn’t saying anything legitimately helpful, but to hear someone echo her own sentiments about the situation—to hear she wasn’t making a mountain out of a molehill, or in this case, a cathill…

Potter said, “You don’t even know his real name.”

“No, I…I know. It’s mad. And it’s not like this is the deepest love the world’s ever seen—we only just started spending time together outside of fighting villains—but for what I’ve got to work with…”

She paused as a strange sort of smile crossed his face.

“D’you know,” he said. “I actually know exactly what you mean.”

“You do?”

“There’s—all right, so my side of this, yeah?”

She gestured for him to continue.

He breathed out. “So there’s this girl at my school,” he said. “She’s—amazing. I honestly don’t know where to start because there’s nothing about her that I don’t like. Except that tiny part where she doesn’t seem to notice me much at all.”

“I can’t believe that you’ve ever been in a room without drawing at least fifty percent of the attention to yourself.”

“You’d think, right? With me, and the hair, and…and anyway. She’s funny and brilliant and kind and gorgeous and I’ve honestly been in love with her basically since we met.”

“Oh,” she said, smiling a little.

_Oh_ was right. _Oho_ was even more appropriate. Her mind swiftly sorted through all the girls in their class: Wendy, Bonnie, Dorcas, Lucinda, Helena—ha, as if—but that was too many to narrow down from yet.

It would be so easy to ask her name…but no, he was trusting her. She couldn’t pry.

“It wasn’t like it was love at first sight,” he said. “Because I—I had to see another side of her. If that
makes sense.”

“Yeah, no, it does.”

“So at first it was…not great. But then,” he said. “It was like, wow, she’s bloody amazing. How did I not see that like immediately? But I couldn’t—it was rough, at first. Between us. And there were some reasons for it. Partially me, and partially…well, it’s kind of a mess to get into. But the point is, I’m completely in love with her, yeah? And in all the time I’ve known her, I don’t think she’s once ever seen me the way I want her to.”

She kind of wished Potter was talking about her, if only because it turned out Potter was adorable when he was completely smitten. No one had ever described her with such genuine adoration. The way his eyes crinkled when he couldn’t hold back another smile from just thinking about this girl…

“I’d ask,” she said, “why you never said anything to her…”

“But you get it,” Potter finished.

“God, I do. I really, really do.”

“So…yeah. That’s been going on, and it’s been so hard to make any progress, and now—er.” His face flushed again. “To make things more confusing, now there’s…another girl.”

She couldn’t think of one girl he’d shown interest in, much less a second one who fancied him besides Helena Hodge. Apparently she was further out of the gossip loop than she’d thought.

“I’d never thought about her that way,” Potter said carefully, “because I was so focused on—the first girl. And then out of the blue the other girl, ah, told me she was…interested.”

“That’s…not a bad thing to hear, right? Unless she’s awful.”

“No, no, she’s—she’s also brilliant, but, you know, now I’m kinda…”

“Stuck.”

“Right.”

“You could give up on the first girl and see if the second girl works out. But you don’t know if you can like her that way, and you can’t just stop liking the first girl.”

Potter tilted his head, the light catching on his glasses. “Is it just me,” he said, “or are we scarily on the same wavelength here?”

She grinned. “Eerily.”

“Guess I shouldn’t be surprised…but yeah. It’s a mess because I hadn’t thought about the second girl that way. But now I am, of course. But I don’t know if I—I mean, she’s so clever. And—um. Good at what she does. School, I mean. And…yeah, she’s definitely got it all going on physically. And when we do stuff together, it’s brilliant, and she’s like…one of my best friends.”

Who the hell was he talking about? She’d never seen him get chummy with a girl at school.

He added, “We’ve never been close, like, emotionally…”

“But you could be?”
“Exactly. Exactly. Because I think she’d get me.” He did a little double-take at his own comment, then went on, “God, she really would. I don’t know why I didn’t think we’d…because I’ve honestly wondered sometimes if we’re not a little psychic with each other. She always seems to know what I’m going to do.” He laughed to himself. “And sometimes I’ve got no bloody clue what she’s up to, and I’ve just got to roll with it, and she’s…funny that way. Funny in a good way. She keeps me on my toes, all the time.”

“And you like being on your toes?”

“Might as well be a bloody ballet dancer, yeah.”

She smiled. “I know the feeling.”

“Yeah, you would, wouldn’t you? I mean, er, from what I’ve seen on telly, and online, and stuff. You’ve got to adapt to stuff quick, and you seem to, er, like that, and, er…yeah. Anyway. That’s, ah…my hot mess of a love life.”

“We’re a hot mess of a pair, aren’t we?”

“The hottest.” Then his eyes went wide as he blurted, “I mean—”

“Relax, Potter.” She propped one shoulder against a shelf. “I know what you meant.”

“Okay. Okay. Good.”

He heaved out a breath, his hands propped on his knees. Then he took off his glasses and polished them with the hem of his shirt.

He really hadn’t had to share any of that, but if she could do for him what he’d just done for her, that was all right. Knowing Black, Potter probably didn’t get to vent to him much. Or at least without annoying Black something awful.

But she was here. And he was here. And they were helping each other.

Or they would be, if she had anything even close to useful to say. Damn.

“I’d love to offer you some advice,” she said, “but I think I’ve just laid out the case for why I am complete shit at telling people I’m into them.”

“In your defense,” he said, the perennial color returning to his cheeks, “you were pretty fucking obvious. I mean, people have been talking about you two getting together from the start. And the blogs always…well, they’ve always gone on about your flirting.”

“Apparently Chat Noir never read the news.”

“Or he felt like he knew you better than they did, and he thought you were just a flirt by nature, that you didn’t mean anything by it…”

Lily sighed. “It’s the only explanation. I know.”

He slid his glasses back on. “In any case, I think you were clear, and Chat Noir was just being really fucking dense.”

“It doesn’t matter, really, does it? The point is, things are really weird between us now, and I don’t know what to do.”
Potter’s brow knitted together above his rectangular glasses. Those glasses really did a lot of favors for his face, now that she was thinking about it. They balanced out the clean line of his jaw.

“I think,” he said carefully, “that you’ve got to be direct with him. Since he’s clearly thicker than the earth’s crust. And, you know…give him some time to think it all through.”

“You think he might come around if I just wait? Like really?”

“I mean…maybe? It’s definitely not impossible. Because you’re brilliant, all right? In basically every way. So yeah, I think anyone would want to see you that way, especially if they knew there was a good shot at you liking them back…and that’s already in the bag.”

Lily swallowed, her heart twanging once more. Potter was being optimistic. He wanted her to feel good, but she had Mary for that.

“He’s had months to see me that way,” she said. “And he never…he never did. Apparently not once. So I don’t know why now…”

“That’s his fucking mistake, isn’t it?” He was so serious when he said it, not at all his usual tone. “If he didn’t fancy you, after all of that, then—it’s not about you. It’s just that he can’t force it, can he? He seems to really respect you and he’d never want to hurt you. It’s nothing you’ve done, or can do…it’s just what it is. It’s his loss.”

She felt like she’d been struck by sunlight. Mary had tried to say something similar, but she was Mary. This was Potter, who had no reason to lie to her or do anything but say what he thought.

“Thanks.” She gave him a thin smile. “And here you thought you’d be no help at all.”

“Who said I was helpful?” he said, one corner of his lips twitching. “I made something up since I obviously can’t speak for Chat Noir. Take it or leave it.”

“I will take it, thanks. I just wish I could say something to help you.”

“You already did help, though. Because—I think I’ve got to keep thinking about this other girl. I’ve thought it over a lot already, actually, and now—I really don’t think it would take much to tip me over the edge for her.”

“You don’t?” Lily asked hopefully.

“I really don’t. Because it’s like—she’s been there, a really perfect match in a lot of ways, for so long, and I’ve been stupid. Dead stupid. And after a certain point of pining for someone…”

“You get sick of it.”

“Exactly. You get sick of being so…desperate.”

Lily could have kissed him, he was so perfectly encapsulating her thoughts.

Kissing actually wasn’t that bad of an idea, was it, because he was fit and so—but no, no, she had to focus. Not to mention he already had two girls to deal with. Ha. Who would have thought? Potter torn between two girls…

Two girls at school. Who were they?

“So you did help,” Potter said. “And I helped you. Clearly I need to give myself more credit. I’m more brilliant than even I knew.”
“I bet I could find a doctor to prescribe you some modesty supplements, if that would help.”

“Modesty is for lesser men,” he said, pushing off the bucket. “I am a Potter.”

“What that second girl sees in you, I’ve no idea. Are you sure she meant she fancied you and not your mate upstairs? He looked pretty enough.”

“Nah,” he said. “It’s all me. I’m very attractive, you know, but it’s my sensitive soul that lures them in.”

“My mistake. I forgot about that after you shoved that girl off your lap when she kissed you.”

“Right-o,” he said loudly. “No time to talk about that because, er, I should probably get back to my mates. Remus and Peter probably think Sirius had me murdered by now.”

“Can’t imagine what that must be like, wanting to shut you up,” she said. “But I should get going, too. So…thanks. Again. I know this isn’t…expected. And if you don’t want me to come back again, just say so. I can take it.”

“Nah,” he said, walking to the pantry door. “Come back whenever. You’re good company.”

“So are you, Potter.” She leveled a grin at him and prepared to dash for the back door. “So are you.”

If Lily had found herself in the same boy situation several years earlier, she’d have gone to her mum with it. She had an older sister, yes, but Petunia was so old-fashioned, especially when it came to boys. Her mum was just more reasonable with the few crushes Lily had had in her early teen years. But then she and Lily had always been more similar than Lily and her sister.

She and Petunia had never seen eye to eye on everything, but they’d been as close as they could be, for people so distinctly unlike each other. At least, that’s how things had been when Lily was younger.

Petunia had several years on Lily, and eventually spending time with her little sister became less socially acceptable. Adding Sev to the mix around the same time certainly didn’t help. He loathed Petunia, and she loathed him, and things had never really been the same after that.

At eighteen, Petunia moved out to marry Vernon Dursley, the most walrus-like creature that Lily had ever had the misfortune of encountering. All that was missing was tusks and a set of fins. And really, temperament-wise, that was probably an insult to walruses.

Lily would never have admitted it at the time, but Petunia’s absence actually made the house cheerier. There was no one around making disdainful remarks about Lily’s choice in friends. No one criticizing her taste in music or clothes. No one to take half of her parents’ attention with anyone else. It was, in actuality, ideal.

The joy of having her parents all to herself didn’t last.

Not long after Petunia moved out, her parents finally agreed to leave Lily home unattended. She was fourteen, thank you, a perfectly respectable age to take care of herself. But an hour after they left for the restaurant, she started vomiting. Again and again, until her stomach cramped with emptiness and sweat beads dripped down her forehead. She rang her mum in tears, begging them to come home.

They never made it back.
In retrospect, the policewoman who showed up at the house did a fairly bang up job of breaking the news, considering she was dealing with an already violently ill child.

Petunia was summoned. The news was shared. The awfulness began.

Her sister had no choice but to assume guardianship. On the rare occasion thereafter when Petunia actually managed to lay eyes on Lily, a cold front swept in around her. Not only had Lily basically killed their parents, but now Lily was clearly trying to ruin Petunia’s life plan.

Because where, Petunia insisted, was Lily supposed to fit into their house? There was only Petunia’s room and the nursery. She was going to be pregnant any day now, she told Lily, watching her struggle to carry a box of books up the stairs. The baby had to be close to the master bedroom.

“You won’t hear the crying as much up there,” Petunia said. “It’s the best option for all of us.”

Under other circumstances, Lily might have fought. But nothing made sense in her life right then, so up into the dusty attic she moved.

Having a niece or nephew, she decided, would actually be a really wonderful turn of events for her. If Lily had to live in the house, at least she could make sure Petunia and Vernon didn’t ruin a perfectly innocent child. Whenever the kid came of age, he or she could run away to Lily’s no-doubt flawless flat in the middle of London to escape the horrors of Dursley parenting.

But months passed. Petunia blamed herself for the empty nursery, even though the Evans women were fertility goddesses and this was clearly Vernon’s fault. Obviously his semen had realized what a colossal fucking mistake they’d made, and refused to burden another person with any trace of his grotesque personality or figure. Vernon and Petunia would have been better off adopting, or better yet, having no children at all.

They kept trying, though, and Lily tried to pretend that she’d never heard any shrill moans from her sister—never hear the baby, her arse—and that her life hadn’t devolved into complete shit overnight.

Things got better after that, of course. Lily saved her own life from the hell it could have been, or at least had done as much as she could.

The December after Lily started at Hogwarts, Petunia faced another miscarriage. She locked herself in her room for two days. When she finally emerged, a gaunter, paler version of herself, she refused to put up the Christmas decorations. She banned Christmas biscuits from the house. They didn’t so much as buy a tree.

Lily had to content herself with a few pine boughs that she snuck into her room. She propped them in a vase and topped them off with a sad, single strand of red tinsel.

“Merry Christmas,” she whispered to Mary when they awoke on Christmas morning.

“Merry Christmas,” Mary chirped. “I’m sorry I didn’t get you anything.”

“You’ve given me plenty.” Lily smiled, reaching under her bed to pull out a small box of biscuits from the Potter bakery. “I had Dorcas pick these up for you.”

Mary beamed, and pressed her head against Lily’s in an affectionate gesture.

Petunia managed to ruin Christmas by the end of the day. Lily had the gall to wish them a merry Christmas at supper—because she was an adult, thank you—and Petunia said in a loud, strained voice, “There is no Christmas this year!”
Things devolved from there. Lily shouted at them. Petunia shouted back. Vernon banged a fork on the table so hard that two of the tines bent.

In the end, Lily rushed for the front foyer to snatch her jacket, her hands shaking with fury.

Vernon roared, “And don’t come back!”

Lily flipped him a rude gesture, stomped out the door, and slammed it shut behind her. With her Ladybug-trained muscles, the wooden frame had the decency to crack sharply.

She marched off into the city, wishing only that she’d had time to grab a hat. London hadn’t seen so much as a snowflake that winter, but the cold still seeped in through the spaces of Lily’s coat, sending her into frequent bouts of shivers.

She couldn’t go back, though. Not tonight. Not after that.

If she’d had the choice, she never would have gone back at all. But there was no choice. She was a minor. Her sister was her guardian. And there was, frankly, nowhere else to go.

She made it three blocks before remembering she’d abandoned Mary. Sweet Mary, who would be worried silly when Lily never came upstairs. Then again, she’d probably heard the shouting, and had definitely heard the door slam.

Lily should have found a way to bring Mary down to dinner with her. Then Lily could have easily transformed into Ladybug now and slipped up into her room unnoticed. But women’s clothes stupidly weren’t designed to hold more than a stick of gum, leaving no room for Mary. All Lily discovered in her trouser pockets now was a crumpled up fiver.

Bloody brilliant. She had no phone, no kwami, and nowhere to go.

Every other post-miscarriage blowout had ended with Lily staying in Severus’s room. He always let Lily have the bed because he was, on occasion, a nice person.

To Lily, at least. If no one else was around.

He never had sound advice on how to handle the Petunia situation. He did listen when Lily ranted, though, and he had plenty of scathing remarks about Petunia that made Lily’s blood rush with wonderful revenge.

Lily had a different friend now. Not a best friend, maybe, not yet—but a friend. Said friend would definitely have let Lily stay over…if only she weren’t in the Canary Islands with her mums. Shit.

Dorcas was out, which left…no one. No one close enough, anyway. Lucinda Zheng’s friendship bracelet itched at Lily’s wrist. It was a token, but a token of something too new. All her burgeoning friendships with other students were too tenuous to handle Lily showing up on Christmas Day and asking to stay the night.

No one at school knew that Lily slept in an attic. That Lily wouldn’t have had to be a model if her sister weren’t such a bitch. That Lily frequently dreamed about setting fire to Petunia’s precious, perfect living room, about watching the custom-made drapes and the fine, upholstered sofas crackle into flame.

Only Sev understood. Only Sev could make sense of this.

Her feet kept scuffling against the pavement, directing her to the Tube. Didn’t people sleep on that?
Maybe no one would begrudge a teenage girl sleeping on the Tube on Christmas. People were always extra nice today.

Her feet also made the decision, though, to transfer lines, and then to take the stairs up to the street level at Green Park Station.

This was possibly the worst idea she’d ever had. If Sev turned her down now—and there was no reason to expect he wouldn’t just spit at her feet—she’d be both horrifyingly embarrassed, and truly out of options. She’d never find a hotel room on Christmas, even if she had the money on her. She really would have to face going home or sleeping rough.

The hotel staff had hung pine boughs with cheery red bows all along the street-level windows, with two lit Christmas trees flocking either side of the main entrance. Albert the doorman tipped his hat to Lily as she entered. She flashed him a smile and a quick “Merry Christmas!”

Gloria and Stefan were working the front desk. Gloria gasped when she spotted Lily, clapping a hand to her mouth. She started to rush around the desk, then remembered her job, and strode very respectfully up to Lily to wrap her in a hug.

“Lily,” she said. “It’s been so long!”

Lily savored the short moment of genuine warmth. Not everyone out there was awful. There were decent, kind people in the world. Lily just didn’t seem to be good friends with very many of them.

Gloria drew her over to Stefan. “Go get Snape,” she told him. “He’s upstairs at the party.”

“But I want to catch up with Lily,” he said with a pout. “You go.”

Gloria glanced around to make sure there were no guests in earshot, and said, “Chicks before dicks. Now go!” To Lily, she added, “Thank god you’re here. I mean, Snape’s always been…um, you know. But especially since you stopped coming around.”

“Sorry,” Lily said automatically. “I mean, I’m not sorry, because it’s not my fault what he does. But…I missed seeing you.”

“We missed you, too, but we don’t blame you at all for…well.” Gloria coughed. “But more importantly, you’ve missed out on some serious developments around here. You’ll never believe who got fired…”

Lily managed to give all the appropriate gasps and laughs as Gloria caught her up to speed on the workings of the hotel that had, for a time, been a second home. She’d have done better as a friend if much of her brain hadn’t been busy dreading the inevitable.

Eventually the footsteps came, hurried ones, nearly running.

“Lily,” Sev breathed.

He stood in the center of the lobby, next to the twenty-foot Christmas tree.

“Severus,” she said awkwardly. “Hi.”

Gloria lightly punched Lily’s shoulder and retreated behind the desk, making a point to look terrifically busy.

“I knew you’d come,” he said. “Not today, but eventually, I mean, because you had to see sense…”
She heaved a breath, sucked it up, and said, “Can we go talk in your room?”

She followed him up the red-carpeted stairs and down the corridor. Not much had changed here besides the sparkling Christmas trees standing proudly in the corners. Christmas always had been the best time of year at the hotel.

Unsurprisingly, Sev’s room showed no sign of seasonal cheer. There was just the usual smattering of textbooks and small tools around the room. She found herself wandering over to his desk, where new circuit boards and prototypes had appeared.

“This one’s half the size of the last one,” she said, picking up a drone the size of a dinner plate.

“I’ve…had a lot of free time.”

Her lips thinned. “Yeah. I guess.” She set down the drone and turned to him. “So…Happy Christmas.”

He didn’t take his eyes off her, not for a moment. “Happy Christmas.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t have a present for you—”

“You came. That’s enough.”

“It’s…it’s really not, though…” She pulled her coat tighter around her. “Vernon told me not to come back.”

Something flickered in Sev’s eyes. “Another miscarriage.”

Lily nodded. “We don’t even have a tree…”

“Stay here,” he said. “As long as you want. I can talk to Riddle, he can make something work—”

“Just tonight will be fine. Tomorrow—I’ll have to go back. I don’t have my things—I don’t have my phone or my toothbrush…”

“Five star hotels tend to provide toothbrushes for guests, you know.”

“But I’m not paying, and I’ll…I’ll go back. It’ll be fine.”

“As long as you’re living with those imbeciles, no. It won’t be.”

“Sev—look. Could we just…pretend it’s Christmas? A good one, I mean.”

He sent her a flat look. “You want to watch Rudolph, don’t you.”

She widened her eyes, letting her lips form a pout that her photographers had referred to as “killer” and “stunning.”

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll have the kitchen send up cocoa and biscuits, too, as long as we’re being saccharinely cliché.”

She grinned and started shucking her coat. “Oh,” she said, pausing. “And, um…thanks.”

He shook his head. “You’re always welcome here, Lily. Always.”

It was still the second-worst Christmas she’d ever had—the first without her parents would probably
always top that list—but at least she had someone. He wasn’t the best friend ever, but he liked her. Loved her, platonically. And he was there for her.

That was what friends did. And that was what she needed.
Chapter 9

Possibly the worst part about discovering Ladybug was in love with him, and getting brutally attacked by ravens, and then having Ladybug show up to talk to James Potter regular person, was telling Sirius about all of it.

He laughed.

And laughed. And laughed some more. At one point he actually rolled off of James’s bed because he was cackling so wildly, knocking his elbow solidly against the wooden floor, but that wasn’t enough to deter him. In fact, he only laughed harder.

Even Algernon seemed to be mocking James with that dry look of his. He’d come out of his mixing bowl when James had started talking, and seemed to be making some sort of stuttering, purring noise.

“I really don’t see what’s so funny,” James said, “about me getting gouged by giant ravens.”

“Cats are always killing birds,” Sirius wheezed. “But not you!”

“I almost fell to my death.”

Sirius was finally catching his breath now. “But you didn’t.”

He climbed up onto the bed, where he lay down with his hands behind his head. Algernon hung in the air over him.

“Fuck both of you.” James turned back to his computer, whose background image showed Lily tiptoeing through tulips in designer heels.

It was so stupid. And so gorgeous.

She was so gorgeous. But now, maybe…not the only way his affections could swing.

It was good, really, that Ladybug had showed up. She had clarified things, even if not in the way she’d intended…not that she’d intended to help him at all. She’d come for help about him. Unknowingly.

This secret identity stuff was getting wicked confusing.

“Would you maybe focus for two bloody seconds?” James said. “We need to find Voldemort.”

“So you can tell Ladybug who you really are?”

“So Ladybug won’t have to leave London, you wanker.”

“And so you can tell Ladybug who you really are.”

“I mean, yes, I’m going to have to tell her that part eventually—”

“Thinking with your prick, as always—”

“D’you know what, either help me catch a supervillain, or get the fuck out.”
“By out you mean banish me to the living room?”

“Yes, obviously. Look, I’m trying to protect the bloody city, but I don’t have a clue how to find Voldemort. That Dumbledore bloke was next to useless—so what if Voldemort can only use it so often, or only within a limited range—people move around, this is London…”

Sirius propped himself up on his elbows. “Limited range?”

“Like, he couldn’t akumatize someone in Watford if he was at Westminster. He’s got to be in London proper while he’s sending out all these akumas.”

Sirius frowned. “Pull up a map of London.”

James reluctantly opened a mapping website over Lily’s face. Sirius came to hunch over James’s shoulder, eyes flicking over the screen.

“Have you ever mapped out the villains?” he asked. “Like where the attacks happened.”

“No, because they’re always random.”

“But if Voldemort can only send an akuma so far, shouldn’t you be able to see where the attacks are clustered?”

“You mean London?”

“More specific than that, though…how many villains have there been now?”

“Lost count after the first twenty or so. There’s been like a couple a week since September…”

“And now it’s May. That’s loads of villains.”

“I’m very good,” James said confidently. “Ladybug and I are very good.”

“Yeah, yeah. But there’s got to be some pattern, right?”

“I mean, maybe. But maybe his reach is bigger than we think…”

Algernon bumped his head into Sirius’s hand, and then licked it.

“Even your cat knows I’m onto something,” Sirius said. “Where’s the furthest south you’ve ever had a villain?”

James stared at the screen. “Oh, Christ…I dunno. There’ve been so many, I honestly can’t remember them all.”

Keeping tabs on the number of villains or where they’d been had always been so much less important than beating them, and then running away to protect his identity.

“James,” Sirius said slowly. “You know that class Pete’s been obsessed with?”

“The computer class?”

“Fuck, James, learn something about technology, would you? Computer class. No, you technological dunce, Peter’s taking a class on different analytical software programs—”

“Computer class.”
Sirius punched his shoulder and stood up straight. “The point is, I bet he’s got something that could analyze the locations of the attacks, and try to find some sort of pattern in them. Then you’d know where to start looking for Voldemort.”

“Oh.” James blinked. “You can do that with computers?”

“For Christ’s sake, you’ve got a phone with a personality that talks back to you.”

James glared at his phone where it lay face-down on his desk. “Siri hates me.”

“Siri is one of the most advanced voice-control systems—”

“She never texts you when I tell her to.”

“I told you, you’ve got to say my full name or she’ll think you mean the adjective—”

“If she’s so brilliant, why can’t she tell the difference? Besides, she’s always wrong about the weather.”

“Just because she told you that one time it wasn’t going to rain—”

“And then it down poured, and I’d left my umbrella at home—”

“And then Lily Evans gave you her umbrella, so really, didn’t Siri bring you together?”

“Oh. Shit. D’you know, I never thought about it like that.” James picked up his phone and brushed a thumb over the screen. “Then let me take the chance to say fuck you, Siri, for causing me months of heartache and longing. This is all your fault and I wish you’d jump off a roof and die.”

“Leave the phone alone and let’s get back to catching a villain, all right? Because I think we need to let Pete in on your furry little secret.”

Algernon growled, narrowing his eyes.

“We need the tech help,” Sirius told him. “Sometimes you’ve got to make a sacrifice to get ahead. Learn chess sometime.”

It was nice, really, to see Algernon offer that masterfully condescending stare at someone else. James also got the distinct impression Algernon was a chess master, which was weird both because Algernon hadn’t said anything, and because Algernon was a tiny flying cat.

“Do we have to tell Peter I’m Chat Noir?” James asked. “Couldn’t we ask him to map villains for, um, other reasons?”

“And those other reasons are?”

“Er…we’re thinking of building a flower shop and need to know where not to put it.”

“A flower shop. Your parents.”

“Yeah. You know. And we can’t be near Voldemort because…flowers attract butterflies. Ha, there, cracked it.”

Sirius flicked James’s ear. “We’re telling him. This is a brilliant idea, but you’re too much of a Luddite to appreciate it. Trust me, yeah?”
Algernon zipped forward and nipped James right where Sirius had flicked him.

“You two are abusive,” James said. “That’s what you are.”

The condescension had disappeared from Algernon’s miniature features, replaced by something James hadn’t seen on him before.

“I don’t know what that look means,” he told Algernon.

Algernon lingered in the air for a second, and then dived for his bed.

“What wonderful advice from a magical cat,” James muttered. Then he pushed his wheeled chair back from his desk. “All right, fine. We’ll tell Peter after I check in with Ladybug tomorrow. We need to make sure she’s all right with it.”

“We can’t tell him at school—he’s got the worst poker face.”

“Shit, you’re right. Yeah, no, not at school.”

“Invite him over after class?”

“Nah,” James said, “he works on Tuesdays.”

“He can say he’s sick, and Riddle can get his own damn coffee for once.”

“Sirius—”

“Good opportunity my arse, he’s just a bloody gopher—rat, really—”

“It makes him feel good, yeah? Important. And god knows he could use the confidence boost.”

James let Sirius grumble on a bit, but only because it was better than Sirius laughing at James some more. Sirius did laugh again later on, when he remembered how hilarious he found everything, but at least James got a brief reprieve.

Of course, once Sirius had left for the night, and James was alone with Algernon, he had nothing to think about except his upcoming conversation with Ladybug. There was such a delicate line to walk here—and yeah, he had terrific balance from being a cat superhero, but this was a little outside his area of expertise.

He knew he attended school the next day—he sat in his desk, his hand copied down bits and pieces of information, he occasionally exchanged words with other students—but by the end of his last class, he could only remember one thing that had happened since that morning.

Lily Evans had gifted him with a warm smile during French class. That was a highlight of not just his day, but his entire life, and that combined with his churning stomach over the superhero business meant nothing else that day mattered.

“You always seem to beat me to the scene,” he told Ladybug after he launched onto the school roof. “But you know what they say—ladybugs first.”

Normally he’d get some sort of cheeky response to that, but this time all he got was a timid smile.

“Hi,” she said.

This was not the Ladybug attitude he’d come to—well, appreciate. *Love* seemed like a strong word
“Hey,” he said warmly. “You all right?”

“I’m—I’ve been better, but how are you? After Saturday…” She rubbed one arm with her hand, half-turning away from him. “I said I was sorry, but I really am so phenomenally sorry, this was all my fault, and—”

He rested a hand on her shoulder. “Hey, no, don’t—it wasn’t your fault, we just weren’t ready for...you know. And those birds—I mean, if you’d asked me to rank animals I’d least like to fight, I definitely wouldn’t have picked a swarm of birds…”

“I shouldn’t have kissed you,” she said, not looking at him. “It was unprofessional.”

“Unprofessional? We’re superheroes, not bloody accountants.”

“We need to focus on our mission. On protecting the city.”

“Look, LB, please don’t beat yourself up over this. So you…kissed me. I mean.” His cheeks felt like they were glowing. “Half the blokes in this city would kill for that chance.”

She swallowed. “But not you.”

He pulled his hand off her shoulder and ran it through his hair. “No, I—I just hadn’t… God, there’s so much I need to… Okay. First of all, can I just say that you were so clear? And obvious, now that I…but I didn’t…I was so stupid and I never thought…I didn’t think you meant it. Any of it. I dunno why, I guess I thought that was what you did to everyone, but now…”

She turned toward him. “But now?”

Those eyes of her were hypnotic, and how had he never noticed that? Large and trusting and fixed on him, hoping not to be hurt... Spilling out his thoughts would have been more awkward with someone who hadn’t saved his life a hundred odd times. She’d taken the leap to show him how she felt, and now it was his turn to catch her.

“I mean,” he said, “I can’t tell you that I’ve felt the same way the whole time, because I haven’t, yeah? And I don’t want to lie to you because you’re my partner and I—I care about you. I do. More than I care about almost anyone else.” Her expression started shuttering, so he hurried on, “And so... so what I’m saying is that—well, ‘cause you’ve seen me that way for, um, what I reckon is a while, and I need... I mean, if we could just...revisit that topic. Later. After I’ve had time to...you know. Is that...is that all right?”

He scrubbed at his head, his cat ears twitching. He’d sounded so much more mature and refined in his head.

She stood there gazing at him, her posture as impeccable as ever, her chin lifted. She was always so bright and vivacious, but particularly here, on top of a drab grey roof. It occurred to him, then and there, that the only thing he’d ever seen her be afraid of was losing him.

He gulped.

She reached up and bopped his left cat ear. What was it with people and his ears?

“Of course I can wait,” she said. “Only...” She drew her bottom lip into her mouth for a moment. “Only I know we’d talked about telling each other who we really are, and—and the thing is, Chat,
that I need…I need an answer before we do that.”

He blinked. “Are you a criminal?”

“Yes, you’ve caught me. I’ve been stopping Voldemort to distract from my true favorite pastime, serial murder.”

If the last two days were anything to go by, he’d soon be just as desperate as her to exchange identities. They couldn’t exactly date only in disguise.

Well, they could, but it would be really bloody weird.

“Sorry,” he said, “that was—I mean, if it means that much to you, yeah, that’s—that’s fine.”

“Right,” she said. “If that’s settled—”

“Tabled.”

“Fine, tabled—only it’s not tabled, sorry, because I just need to say—because I haven’t been direct, and I’m trying to…” She breathed out through her nose, balled her hands, and looked him in the eye. “I fancy you, Chat. In case that was somehow unclear, that’s—that’s what it is.”

James flung up his hands. “No, yeah, I—I definitely got that now.” He paused, then dropped his hands. “I mean, er… Thank you?”

She had such a soft smile sometimes. Usually directed at him—oh. Wow, was he an idiot. She’d been lobbing these beauties around just for him and he hadn’t been appreciating them at all.

Idiot. Complete idiot.

Which was what she’d told him because she was always straight with him and she always seemed to get what he meant and—

And, er, maybe he wouldn’t need that much time to get back to her.

“Oh, chaton,” she said. “D’you want me to change the topic?”

“Yesplease.”

That soft smile shifted into something slyer.

“Only for you, mon minou,” she said. “Here you are: we need to come up with a plan to find Voldemort.”

“Oh thank god, yeah, let’s talk about that.”

“I was thinking that if he’s got a limited range, maybe we should map out—”

“Where the akumas struck to try to find the cluster pattern.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “I suppose it was the obvious move.”

“Oh yes,” he assured her. “The idea came to me at once.”

“It’ll be a pain to map them all out, but I think I can probably do it…shit. I don’t know when. With all the end of year revising I’ve got to start, and my—er, other commitments… I don’t suppose
you’ve got time to do it?”

“Yeahhh, about that. One of my mates is actually like a wizard at this stuff, and I think I could probably get him to help…but I think it’s gonna be a pretty weird thing to ask him to do if he doesn’t know I’m Chat Noir.”

“You trust him with that?”

“Yeah, ‘course. I mean, I’d have told him and at least one other mate earlier, but it was a risk thing, you know? And if we’re going after Voldemort soon, then I guess I don’t see the harm in telling one person now. I’d probably tell him as soon as we nabbed Voldemort anyway.” James shrugged. “But I wanted to make sure you were all right with it first.”

“Oh,” she said, and then smiled. God, those were brilliant smiles. “That’s sweet, but it’s your identity, isn’t it? Not mine.”

“Yeah, but this is our thing. Our ‘mission,’ according to Dumbledore.” He snorted. “Which, like, we never got to talk about that, but holy fuck—”

“He barely told us anything!”

“What the hell, right? Oh, here are two magic pieces of jewelry, you might die or completely fuck up the world.”

“What if I gave you absolutely no information and left magical objects in your room where anyone could find them? It’s just so thoroughly irresponsible.”

James’s pulse thrummed. This was it. This was them back to normal.

“I’ll give him this,” James said. “He made bloody good tea.”

“It was good, wasn’t it?” she mused. “Too bad we can never go back now.”

“Nope, I think we made our feelings pretty clear. Bridge burned.”

“Well, who needs that wanker, or his amazing tea? We’ll do this without him.”

“I pocketed one of his sweets from the register—never had better.”

“You didn’t.”

“I was pissed off. It was just a sweet.”

“Then I feel like I have to ask,” she said. “Did it have drugs in it?”

“Surprisingly, nothing but delicious caramel filling.”

“I hope that’s his favorite and you’ve deprived him of it.”

His lips twitched. “And then a really fit girl kissed me, so the day was full of unexpected surprises.”

Ladybug, superhero of London, defeater of evil, and all around badass, blushed and looked away. 

Oh. So that was how it felt.

He could work with that.
“Anyway,” James said lightly. “Sounds like you’re all right with me spilling the beans to P—my mate. Dunno how long it’ll take, he’s got a job and school and stuff, but you know, this is about defeating evil, so I think he’ll prioritize it right up there with playing Cupcake Crush on his phone.”

“Very high, then.”

“Absolutely.”

God, this was fun. She was fun. They really could work together in other ways, couldn’t they?

And here he’d been vaguely certain he’d manage to fuck this up even further. But he hadn’t. They had a plan. Both for Voldemort, and for...other things.

“Right,” she said, glancing up at the sun. “If we’re all sorted out...I should really go.”

“Already?”

Curse his reckless mouth, throwing out all these words without checking for approval first.

“Not because I want to,” she said. “Promise. I’ve got a thing, and not the convenient I’ve got a thing excuse, but a real, legitimate thing.”

“That’s exactly what someone would say if they really wanted to go finish binge watching a new show.”

“All that confidence you throw around, and you think I’d pick telly over you?”

“No, you’re right. I’m definitely more entertaining.”

“And there we’re back to normal.” Another smile, this one familiar and pleased and equally stunning. “D’you want to plan to check in later this week, though? Outside of an akuma attack.”

“Yeah, ‘course. Same time and place on Friday?”

“No good, I’ve got a thing. Another real thing, I swear. Saturday?”

“Brilliant. Until then.” He extended his staff until it was as tall as him. “Au revoir, cherie.”

Her face turned violently red. “Chat—”

“What? You’ve been calling me French nicknames all this time. And what can I say, I’m feeling chatty tonight.”

She pressed her lips together as she folded her arms. “You can’t just—you can’t table it and then say stuff like that.”

His ears drooped. “Oh. Shit, you’re right. Fuck. See, this is why we’re a team. You keep me in line, Ladybug. A line made of polka dots, probably, but a line all the same.”

She sighed. “If you’re going to say that stuff...I need you to mean it, and right now...”

“No, no, I get it. That’s totally fair.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Now run along, chaton, before your owner comes looking for you.”

The first image to spring to mind was of Sirius, but really, there was only one person holding the
leash on him. One person who grabbed his tail with impunity.

He gave her a sly smile and a wink.

“Can’t,” he said. “She’s right here.” And then he vaulted off the rooftop.

She shouted something after him, but it didn’t carry far enough.

No, he really couldn’t tease her like that. That was cruel. But he could think about it.

He could think about it a lot.

The day Peter got a job with Riddle was a monumental day all around.

By late January, James was fretting about Lily again. Somehow, miraculously, she’d reconnected with Snape over Christmas hols. Somehow, unfathomably, she’d given him another chance.

James had to watch as all those other blossoming friendships with other students wilted under the menacing glare of Severus Snape. Snape followed her constantly, sneering at anyone who looked like they were even thinking about talking to Lily.

Except Meadowes. Dorcas Meadowes, who was James’s new hero. She kept inviting Lily to do things after school, and she resolutely sat next to Lily in the classes they didn’t share with Snape.

In all the other classes, of course, he was glued to Lily’s side.

It hurt, in a visceral sort of way, to see those isolationist walls spring up around Lily again. She needed other people. She deserved other people.

Infuriatingly, James could do nothing about any of it. Even if he’d found a moment to somehow talk to Lily alone, he wasn’t her friend. She had no reason to listen to him. And it would probably come off a little creepy that he’d been keeping such a close eye on her.

He worried all the same.

In the end, he turned out to be the final nail in the coffin of Lily’s and Snape’s friendship, but not on purpose. In some ways, it was really McGonagall’s fault.

Perhaps fed up with the elitist, snotty attitudes of some of the students, she arranged a work experience day for their class.

“Draw a slip to learn your assignment,” she said, offering up a tartan, winter hat. James’s class stood in a loose circle around her in the lobby of Mayor Riddle’s hotel. “Given the nature of this task, I’ll be evaluating you based on your effort and commitment.”

Snape’s crowd looked ready to murder someone. Mutters like beneath me and slipping school standards and unbelievable came out of their section of the circle.

James, for one, was keeping his fingers crossed for a kitchen position. He could bake in his sleep. And had, twice, to comedic and pyrotechnic effect.

Sirius wasn’t paying attention, but in a general way, not because he resented McGonagall for dragging them here. He was whispering things to Remus to try to make him laugh and get reprimanded. By the growing red on Remus’s face, and the way he kept jamming his lips together, Sirius was getting close.
Peter, of course, was listening raptly. McGonagall tipped the hat toward him first.

“Mr. Pettigrew,” she said. “If you’d start us off.”

Peter’s hand hesitated, then darted in and out of the hat. He unfolded the slip to read, “Assistant.” He looked up, concerned. “Assistant to what?”

“To me,” said Mayor Riddle. He slid smoothly between the students to walk up to Peter, eyes assessing his new target. “You’ll be assisting me for the day, in whatever manner I require.”

Peter said in a tiny voice: “Um.”

A low, nearly growling noise came from Riddle’s fan club. Snape’s dark eyes had narrowed to slits.

“So much for your rigging,” Avery whispered to him.

James nudged Sirius and laughed.

Riddle glanced sideways toward them. “Is something funny, Misters…”

Like he didn’t know who they were. Like he didn’t see them all the time at fundraisers and parties and things.

“Wilberforce,” said Sirius. “And this here’s Elvendork.”

James nodded seriously while a few students snickered around the circle. Meadowes was laughing, which meant Lily might be, too, but she stood behind Meadowes, out of James’s sight.

“Mhm,” said Riddle. He had such a condescending, know-it-all look on his face all the time, one James would’ve loved to have clawed right off of him.

Peter’s lip trembled. He shook his head slightly at them, a silent request that James had to grant.

“Potter, Mr. Mayor, sir.” He stuck out his hand. “You’ll know my parents, of course. Euphemia and Fleamont.”

“Of course.” Riddle’s grip was cold, and uncomfortably tight. When social norms dictated he should have let go, he instead twisted his wrist, angling to better see James’s hand. “That’s a fine ring—a family heirloom?”

His eyes had locked onto James’s silver Miraculous ring.

James’s heart paused for the briefest of moments.

“Yes,” he said too quickly. He drew his hand back. “From my father’s side.”

Riddle didn’t have time to comment before Sirius’s hand was latching onto his.

“Sirius Black,” he said. “And yes, these good looks are also a family heirloom.”

“Charmed,” Riddle said, with a vague air of disdain. “You’ll have to send my regards to both your families.”

“Will do,” James chirped.

Sirius added, “We always do what the Mayor says.”
“Just like Pete here is going to do for you all day.”

“Indeed.” Riddle placed a hand on Peter’s shoulder. “Well, if you’ve managed to sufficiently entertain your classmates, I do need assistance straightaway.” He nodded at McGonagall. “Minerva.”

She lifted her chin ever so slightly. “Tom.”

Riddle’s jaw gave a minute twitch, which only made McGonagall even more of a badass in James’s mind. He didn’t deserve the number of terrific women in his life.

Once Riddle had left with a still-mute Peter, McGonagall shot James and Sirius one of her Looks, and went back to distributing assignments.

James tried to muffle his laughter when Mulciber and Snape drew bellboy duty. Mulciber at least had the upper body strength for the job, but Snape’s twiggy arms would be a disaster when matched against the overly-packed suitcases of the hotel’s ritzy guests.

Meadowes headed off to be a concierge—another hilarity waiting to happen—and Lily drew housekeeping.

James’s first thought was, _fuck baking give me cleaning_. His second thought was about how good it would feel to punch away the superior smirks that popped up on Avery’s and Rookwood’s faces.

Likely out of spite, McGonagall offered the hat to James and his remaining friends last.

“Doorman,” said Remus thoughtfully. “But do I get to wear a top hat?”

McGonagall raised her eyebrows. “I’m certain it can be arranged.”

“Before I accept the position, I’d like to inquire about the amount of holiday time it offers—”

“To your station, Lupin.”

Remus saluted the lot of them and headed for the front door, while McGonagall stuck the hat out to Sirius. He drew the kitchen slip James had been waiting for.

“Want it?” Sirius asked.

“There will be no trades,” McGonagall said. “Potter will take whatever’s left.”

James fished out the one remaining slip.

He beamed. “Housekeeping!”

The other students had all dispersed by now. McGonagall glanced around the quieting lobby and said, “Trade with Potter, Black.”

“What!” James clenched his hand around his slip. “You just said—”

“I won’t have you antagonizing Evans.”

“He doesn’t want to _antagonize_ her,” Sirius said. “He’d rather spend their time alone in a fancy hotel room doing—”

James clapped a hand over Sirius’s mouth, his face blazing hot.
“I’d respect her, is what I’d do!” James said, and yanked his hand back.

“Oh,” said Sirius, “is that what we’re calling it these days.”

McGonagall cleared her throat. “For the love of—fine. Potter, stick with Evans, but if you so much as get her riled up—”

“He’d love to rile her up,” muttered Sirius.

“—then you’ll write lines until your fingers fall off.” McGonagall gave Sirius a stern look. “And if you care to make any more insinuations, Mr. Black, you can join him.”

Sirius waved a dismissive hand. “Yes, yes, understood.”

“Now. To your stations, both of you.”

James all but skipped down the corridor to the housekeeping office. He strode inside, caught sight of Lily conversing with an older gentleman, and immediately lost all his confidence.

“Um,” he said.

“Oh. Potter,” said Lily. She didn’t look put out, she didn’t—or so James told himself. “I didn’t know there’d be someone else coming. Fabian’s already started explaining what to do.”

“Um. That’s fine, really,” James said, one hand on the back of his neck. “I’ll learn from you. Just, er, keep going. Fabian, was it? You seem, er, nice. Ginger. You seem ginger. Looks like I’m in the gingerless minority…” He coughed. “Anyway.”

Fabian looked at James the same way he might look at a brain-damaged dog. “Right,” he said. “Where was I…”

James barely heard a word he said, too busy subtly watching Lily. She, at least, was picking up what the hell they were supposed to be doing. That was good.

This was good. Him and Lily. Alone. On a job. In hotel rooms.

This was his chance to—

Well, he didn’t know what. To do…something. How was he supposed to focus when she was there and gorgeous and perfect?

Befriend her. That was it. She needed friends that weren’t afraid of Snape, and James certainly fit into that category.

All he’d have to do was wait until they were alone—

“Wait,” James said, catching what Fabian had just said. “You’re coming with us?”

Fabian kept up that look that said he thought James was simple. Which, honestly, James had earned.

“You thought,” Fabian said slowly, “that we would send two untrained teenagers alone to clean rooms in a five-star hotel?”

“Terrific point you’ve just made. Absolutely top-notch. Nope. I am totally on board.”

“Uh huh,” said Fabian.
Unsurprisingly, not listening didn’t pay off once they headed out with the cleaning cart. In the first room they entered, James started to tear the sheets off the bed, but was stopped by Fabian at once.

“Gloves, Potter,” he said. “Always, always gloves.”

James looked down at where his hands were touching the sheets that someone had slept in, or worse. He blanched, dropping the sheets at once.

Lily muffled her laugh with a hand. Even though it was at his expense, he wished she hadn’t. She was always quieting herself at school and it was a first-class sin. That wit and that laugh deserved to be heard.

James rushed to the bathroom to scrub at his hands with soap. By the time he came out with gloves on, Lily had tied her hair up in a ponytail, and was on her knees scrubbing at a dark stain on the intricately patterned carpet.

“Dark’s good.” Fabian ran a cleaning rag atop the fireplace mantle, grinning at Lily. “It’s definitely not blood or, um, other bodily fluids.”

Lily grinned back at him, and really, it was probably just because they were both ginger. They were required to get along. Lily wasn’t eyeing him up. Probably.

“I’m used to it,” Lily said. “Sev’s carpet’s got grease stains all over it.”

James gawked at her—was she insulting Snape?

“Motor oil’s wicked hard to get out,” Fabian agreed.

Oh. That was more normal, then.

The radio hanging off the cart crackled. “Prewett, would you please come up to five?” came a dainty voice. “I need someone strong to help me set some furniture to rights.”

Lily waggled her eyebrows at Fabian. “Ooh,” she said. “Wonder what Emmeline could want.”

Fabian, being ginger, didn’t blush so much as turn into a sunburned tomato. “She just said,” he muttered. “Furniture lifting, and stuff.”

“Mhm. You’d better be off, then.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Fabian left his rag on the mantle and headed for the door. “Keep working, you lazy gits.”

“Fuck you,” Lily called after him.

James gasped.

“What?” she said, returning to her task.

“Nothing. Nothing at all. Um.”

Nothing except that James had just learned how much certain parts of his anatomy liked hearing very pretty girls curse. But obviously that was not an appropriate thing to say. Even he knew that.

For lack of anything else to do, James picked up Fabian’s rag and started cleaning off the vanity.
“So,” he said casually. “You, er, come here often?”

She paused to stare up at him. “I honestly have no response to that.”

“Because you—and Snape… Never mind.”

“Oh. That, yeah. I guess so.”

James gestured at the room. “This place is nicer than my house. Not that my house is that nice. But, um. You know. It’s in Belgravia. So.”

“So you’re rich and bragging about it? Classy, Potter.”

“No, that’s not what I—I only meant it’s extra posh here. And you’re, ah, lucky to get to be here a lot. In this posh hotel.”

Lily made a noncommittal noise and stood up, the carpet mostly clean beneath her.

“So.” He mentally scrambled for topics. “Um. Have a good Christmas?”

“No,” she said shortly, and ripped the fitted sheet off the bed. “You?”

“Er, it was all right.”

Hols had been brilliant. Sirius had stayed over for several days in a row. His dad had bought him a custom photo-book of Lily’s modeling work. And his mum had taught him the secret recipe for her chocolate ginger molasses biscuits.

But that wasn’t really what you said to someone who just admitted to having a shit Christmas.

“Dorcas is nice,” he announced.

“Um, yeah.” Lily brushed an arm over her forehead, pushing a few stray hairs out of her eyes. “I mean, nice makes her seem so…simple. She’s more complex than that.”

“Yeah, yeah, ‘course. She’s, um, interesting.”

“Yeah. That too.”

James was aware that he was being the worst conversationalist in the world. But he’d never expected to have this chance. He hadn’t prepared.

“So,” he said, looking for more surfaces to clean.

“Your so keeps getting longer. Is that some sort of new verbal tic?”

“Ha. Ha, you are a true wit,” James said pathetically. “I’m only, um. I thought—I’d be baking today, is all.”

“You wanted to be in the kitchen?” She frowned, and shoved the sheets in a large laundry bag. “I take it back, that was a stupid question. Of course you did.”

“Best bakery in Belgravia,” he offered.

“Yes, you just said where you lived. You don’t have to keep showing off about it. Unless you’re forgetting and need to remind yourself?”
“Okay, fine, I was being a bit slow earlier with Fabian, I know, but I only meant… I just like the alliteration, is all.”

“Oh. Well, I can’t fault you for that.”

That was about as close to a compliment as she’d ever come, which sent James’s heart soaring.

“Right,” he said, emboldened. “And, er, I was trying to say that you should stop by. Sometime. The bakery, that is. If, er. You want.”

“Unfortunately being a model means there’s not much room in my diet for sweets.”

“So you can bring up being a model, but I can’t bring up living in Belgravia?”

“Hm, you do make a fair point. And you said the second one was for alliteration love, so I take it back.”

Witty and fair. James sighed happily.

And in the process knocked a framed picture off a side table with the cleaning rag. The frame collided with the ground, the glass shattering into pieces.

“Shit.”

He dropped to a crouch to pick up the frame, but then dropped it immediately with another muttered curse. Blood well up in a neat line along his index finger.

Lily rushed over with a tissue from the cart.

“Here,” she said. “Run down to Dorcas at the concierge desk, and tell her there’s a first aid kit in the third drawer from the bottom.”

James pressed the tissue against his finger. “So you do come here a lot.”

Lily rolled her eyes. Maybe he was looking too hard, but the corners of her lips seemed to twitch.

“Go on,” she said, and nodded at the door.

He trudged out of the room. His one chance to be alone with Lily Evans, and he’d gone and injured himself. But if he hurried, he thought, picking up his pace in the corridor, maybe he’d make it back before Fabian.

Meadowes laughed when James told her he was working with Lily, and rummaged in the drawer for a plaster.

“Don’t see what’s so funny,” he muttered, wrapping up his finger.

“That’s a lie,” she said. “But don’t worry. I’m not telling.”

“That’s enough!” came a voice from across the lobby.

James spun around to see a hotel employee standing toe to toe with Snape in front of the reception desk.

“Any other day,” the woman told Snape, “you can talk down to me as much as you want. But today you’re the bellboy, and if I ask you to please take Mr. Stone’s luggage up to his room, you’ll bloody
well do it!"

Snape ripped off the nametag someone had stuck on the front of his shirt. “I quit,” he said. “I refuse to debase myself by accepting orders from someone as lowly and thoroughly uneducated as you!”

“You can’t quit, it’s a school project!”

An ominous calm settled over Snape.

He folded his arms neatly. “I concede, I’m not in a position to quit. But you are. Or you would be, if you hadn’t started out life the way you intended to finish, a dim-witted girl who let her braindead boyfriend knock her up at sixteen, who has to slave for people she loathes so she can afford to live on the sofa in her mother’s living room.”

All eyes in the lobby had centered firmly on the two of them.

The girl lasted a moment, still struck mute by the attack, and then ran into a back office. The door slammed shut behind her.

“Fuck,” James said. “Fucking fuck—not today, not today—”

He raced across the lobby, nearly slipping on the polished stone floor. He passed a triumphant-looking Snape and rattled on the office doorknob.

“Hello?” he called. “Hi, hello, please open the door, I’d love to talk to you right now—”

No one answered.

James was going to be too late.

He had to go transform—he had to go warn Lily—

He bolted across the lobby, thundered up the carpeted stairs, and burst back into the hotel room.

“Hi,” he said, panting. “So, I can’t explain right now, but you need to close the door and lock it, and don’t open it for anyone, not even Fabian.”

Lily stepped back from cleaning the mirror above the fireplace. “What?”

“Theres going to be an akuma attack any minute now, so you need to protect yourself. Stay here, yeah?”

She raised her eyebrows. “How d’you know there’s going to be an attack? Learning divination in Belgravia in your spare time?”

“Because your bloody best mate just did his thing, all right? So now I’ve got to—”

“Snape?” She took a step closer. “Pray tell, what’s his thing? And no dirty answers, that’s too easy.”

“You know, his holier-than-thou—or I guess better-than-thou, in this case the thou being a desk worker downstairs…she’s crying in a back room…you know, the whole, um…”

A crease had appeared between Lily’s eyebrows.

Oh, god. She didn’t know.
She didn’t know what Snape did.

That explained a lot, actually. Like how she stomached him at all.

“Are you suggesting he made someone cry?” she asked.

“I’m, um… Shit. Okay, so I know that you know that Snape and I, we’re, um—”

“Mortal enemies.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever, so I know you don’t want to listen to me… so… fuck. Fuck! I don’t have time for this. Later, okay, back at school, you ask Nick Crabtree and Evan McNamee and Lucinda Zheng —right, shit, I could go on. Go ask any of them how they ended up being akumatized, all right? I know you think my word is shit on this, so fuck it. Do your own research.”

He spun back toward the door.

Then he pivoted back to Lily.

“I meant that in the most respectful way possible,” he added. “Just so you know. Now close the door and don’t open it up again until I say so!”

“Where are you going, then?” she asked.

“To get help!” he answered, and pulled the door shut behind him.

He sprinted down the corridor, arms pumping, coming to a stop near the lobby staircase.

Shrieks. Those were definitely shrieks down there. Shrieks, and one very loud, very clear: “I am Conci-urge!”

Shit.

He pulled a sleepy kwami out of his pocket.

“Time to wake up, Algernon,” he said. “Claws out!”
Lily spent the evening after talking to Chat gushing in her room to Mary.

“He doesn’t hate me!” she said. “He’s open to thinking about it!”

Mary swooped back and forth in excitement. “I heard, Lily, I heard!”

Lily paused. “That’s a bit pathetic on my end, isn’t it, being excited he’s just thinking about it.”

“No, no, it’s really a good thing!”

“Ha, as long as that’s settled, then I’m officially happy about it.”

She’d nearly ruined everything, but she hadn’t. Chat had come around. Not to fancying her—which, fine, it had only been a few days—but they’d been *them*. Just there, close to the end. Bitching about Dumbledore. Coming up with a plan. They were *them* again.

For the moment, anyway. Things might get awkward once she had to tell him she was Lily Evans. Because the one and only time he’d ever seemed interested in her, she’d had no mask on at all. If he was only into her because she was a model…well. He had to pick her before he knew.

Maybe he would. He’d said he cared about her—he’d called her *mon cherie*—

She let herself tip backwards onto her bed, her hands pressed against her chest, beaming.

The funny thing was, her meeting would have gone so much worse if she hadn’t talked to Potter first. If he hadn’t calmed her down and reassured her and basically been a perfectly funny and decent gentleman about it.

They really hadn’t talked much since their ill-fated housekeeping assignment. It had barely qualified as a conversation, really: it had been too short, and awkward, and then he’d come in shouting about Severus…

And then that had all played out. But Potter…in that moment in the hotel room, he could have thoroughly slammed Sev. He could have listed off all the shitty things Sev had ever done to his classmates, and played the *told you he was an arse* card, and generally been a victorious prick about all of it.

But he honestly hadn’t wanted to be the one to tell her. Probably in part because if he had, she never would have believed him, but the rest of it…

It was so peculiar, seeing these depths in Potter. In James Potter, the bloke who’d nearly forced her exit from the school on day one.

James Potter, who had apparently taken it upon himself to comfort an akuma victim. James Potter, who had insisted on offering up some of his own secrets in exchange for Ladybug’s.

James Potter, who was in love with one girl and had another one in love with him!

Her resolve to not investigate that matter lasted no time at all.

“Dorcas,” Lily said at lunch the next day. “’D’you happen to know who fancies Potter?”
Dorcas leveled a look at her and asked flatly, “Why do you ask?”

“I—well, I don’t want to break any confidences, only...I heard that someone does.”

“You mean besides Helena Hodge?”

“Obviously.”

“And besides Charlene Stebbins.”

“I thought she liked Black.”

“She likes him more, but she’d take both, if she could.”

Lily considered this, but could not admit to the surprising thoughts that slipped into her mind.

“Besides her,” Lily said instead.

“Rhonda Roper fancied him back in like September, but she only really likes athletes, so she stopped after he got kicked off the football team.”

“Oh,” said Lily. “D’you know why he got kicked off the team? Sev said that he kept missing practice—well, he said Potter thought he was too good for practice, but that doesn’t seem like Potter, does it?”

“He lives for football, so no. But I do have a theory about why he missed practice.” Dorcas looked at Lily meaningfully. “It involves him being more interested in someone else. Someone he could find around London.”

“Around London...what, like Ladybug?”

“Nope, we’re done here. I give up. Again.”

Dorcas started getting up from their spot on the grass, but Lily grabbed her arm.

“Where are you going? You can’t leave me hanging like that.”

“I shouldn’t have brought it up. I promised Potter I wouldn’t tell.”

“What? When?”

“At the hotel.”

“You are a miserable, taunting friend.”

“Stop whinging. This is your own fault.”

Lily harrumphed and let Dorcas wander off.

She’d have loved to let Mary out of her school bag to talk, but there were too many people in the courtyard to get away with it.

Lily passed the afternoon taking mental inventory of the girls in her class. There just didn’t seem to be any girls Potter was particularly close to. It was a maddening puzzle.

Unless the girl was in another year? But then when would they have worked together?
At least Potter didn’t seem to be showing any lingering weirdness after being randomly visited by Ladybug. He sat in the back most classes, barely paying attention but still nailing questions whenever a teacher called on him.

She supposed she could see why other girls were interested in him. He was fit, there was no doubt about that. Not classically, not like Black, but there was a certain attractiveness to his long nose and strong jaw and brown skin, and then there was that hair, which was certainly worthy of poetry, the way it seemed to defy any normal rules about locks and how they should fall…

And there was the whole much-too-cocky vibe he had going, the sassing the teachers thing, the being brilliant without hardly trying bit…

So yes, Lily could see why other girls would find that attractive.

He was just never really like that around her. At least, when she was Lily. With his mates, with Bonnie Grogan, with Ladybug—he was…all right, charming. In a way. A good listener. Someone who cared.

But not with Lily. And that was weird, too, wasn’t it? Not as weird as him skiving off football practice, but still weird.

It had to be because of Severus. That was definitely why they’d started off so wrong, but she hadn’t been friends with Sev since the hotel blowout in January. All the other students started warming up to her again around March, once it was clear she really had dumped Severus for good…but not Potter.

Maybe he thought she was angry with him for telling her Sev had caused all those akumas. Maybe he thought she was still furious over those first two days of school. Or maybe he genuinely didn’t like her, the same way Black didn’t seem to like anyone but his three friends. But that didn’t seem right, either.

She glanced back at him again. He held a paper sack under his desk, and seemed to be slipping his mates…biscuits.

She turned back to the front and smothered her laugh. Sneaking biscuits—it was so utterly ridiculous—

But that was Potter, wasn’t it? Pretty ridiculous, but also pretty wonderful, in certain regards.

She didn’t really plan to go to the bakery after class. Yes, Petunia would throw another fit if Lily was late, but seeing those biscuits had reminded Lily about Potter in the hotel room. Potter shyly admitting to liking the alliteration of best bakery in Belgravia. Potter suggesting that she come by the bakery sometime…

Walking there took longer than hopping over rooftops, but it still didn’t take more than a few minutes, and it was a lovely walk besides. Belgravia, lingering alongside Buckingham Palace, accordingly had some of the nicest homes in the entire city, with neatly manicured greens, and plenty of black cabs darting through the streets.

She didn’t know why she expected Potter to beat her to the bakery. She didn’t know why she assumed he’d be working in the shop at all, when his parents were the owners and bakers.

A woman with Potter’s eyes and thin nose stood behind the till.

“Good afternoon,” she said when Lily walked in.
Lily immediately froze. This wasn’t like when she visited as Ladybug—this visit was tied to her real
life, her real self—this was officially stupider than any previous visit she’d made—

“Hi,” she said meekly.

Multi-layered cakes and ornately-decorated biscuits and meringue-topped pies stood proudly in glass
cases around the shop. Potter probably hadn’t been exaggerating that it was the best in Belgravia,
which was saying something.

Potter’s mum said, “Are you looking for anything in particular today?”

Your son, Lily’s mind supplied. But she said, “Oh, nothing really. I’d just like something…special.”

“Ooh, treating yourself,” said Mrs. Potter. “I definitely approve. Well, first things first. Are you a
biscuit or a cake sort of girl?”

Lily made her way down the line of cases, eyeing all the delicious, impeccable treats in front of her.
Scones, bars, tortes, macarons—

Her dad had been a macaron fanatic. On special occasions, he’d bring home just one, given the cost,
and carefully slice it in half to split with Lily. He’d savor each tiny bite, and laugh when Lily popped
her share whole into her mouth. Even though he’d been the one laughing, he’d ruffle her hair and
shush her…

Her mum and Petunia never knew.

“Biscuits,” Lily said. “Six macarons, please. Doesn’t matter which kind.”

It felt criminal to spend so much money on tiny, delicate biscuits. But if her dad had lived, she would
have bought him macarons everyday…of course, if he’d lived, she’d never have been able to afford
them, but she would have made that trade in an instant, faster than an instant, as quick as someone
would offer...

Tears welled behind her eyelids.

She half turned away under the guise of examining a series of biscuits shaped like lions, while trying
to will her tears away until later. Mrs. Potter gently packaged the macarons in a glossy white box,
and wrapped it up with a wide maroon ribbon, sneaking peeks at Lily when she thought Lily wasn’t
looking.

But Lily was used to people looking.

She sniffled only once—very subtly, if she said so herself—then joined Mrs. Potter at the till. She
started rummaging in her bag for her wallet, still fighting against the tightness of her throat that would
give her away, but Mrs. Potter reached across the counter to still Lily’s hand.

“Are you all right, dear?”

Which was, really, the worst thing you could ask someone teetering on the brink of crying.

“Yeah,” Lily said, a couple tears spilling out. “Yeah, I’m so sorry, it’s just, my dad always liked
them, and he’s…”

How long had he been gone, and she still couldn’t say it?

“They’re on the house,” said Mrs. Potter. Her hand was steady on Lily’s.
“No,” Lily said, sniffling, “no, please, I can pay for them—"

“Please. I want you to have them.”

More tears flowed out because why were the Potters so bloody nice to her, when she’d done nothing for them? And then she was crying because she didn’t want to be crying, especially not here…

Mrs. Potter—“Euphemia, dear”—guided her over to the lone table in the shop, and fetched a box of tissues from the back.

She sat patiently across from Lily, smiling faintly as the tears ran their course. Lily blew through tissue after tissue, but never felt rushed, or judged. She dove into the wave of grief, which was, mercifully, less powerful than some of the others she’d experienced lately.

When her tears had mostly abated, Euphemia patted her hand and said, “I won’t have you feeling ashamed about missing him. It’s good to have feelings. They prove you’re human.”

Lily blew her nose again. “Sometimes I feel like I’ve got more than my fair share of them.”

“You’re young. It’ll settle, I promise.”

“Thank you,” Lily said, a few lingering tears still working their way out. “For the macarons, and the tissues, and not…well, kicking me out for being a mess.”

“Having long been a mess myself, I’m hardly about to kick out someone equally afflicted.”

“You’re a brilliant scientist. You own your own bakery. How could you possibly be a mess?”

“Years of practice, my dear. Now, you…don’t I know you from somewhere?”

“Yes,” Lily sighed. “You’ve probably seen the ads.”

“Oh, yes. Lily Evans, wasn’t it? Well, if you’re a model, you’re hardly a true mess.”

“Years of practice.”

Euphemia threw her head back and laughed.

“Oh, I am glad you came by today,” she said. “Eat a macaron and then you may leave.”

“But not until then?”

“Absolutely not. I’m too afraid you’ll ditch the macarons when you leave—I imagine you’ve a strict diet, yes?”

“Yes… This was a, er, impulse stop.”

“Then eat up. The lavender is my favorite.”

Lily slid the ribbon off the box to reveal six macarons nested neatly inside, forming rows of airy biscuit and dainty filling.

“Ohmygod,” she said through her first mouthful. She didn’t hurry to swallow, savoring every morsel of the bite. “This is literally the best thing I’ve ever eaten.”

Euphemia patted her hand again and stood up. “Yes, dear. I know.”
This was too posh an establishment for a bell, but Lily heard the door open behind her all the same.

“Lily,” came Potter’s astonished voice.

Her face turned blazing hot.

“Hi,” she said.

“Oh, good.” Euphemia grabbed Potter’s shoulder and pushed him down into her now-empty seat. “Keep Lily company for another few minutes. She’s not to leave until she’s finished that macaron.”

Potter’s eyes were huge as he said: “Er.”

Euphemia picked up the tissues and box and headed toward the back of the shop. “I’ll be in the kitchen beating egg whites. The mixer is very loud, Lily, just so you know.”

Potter was too busy taking in the crumpled up tissues in his mum’s hand to notice Lily’s own confused look.

Euphemia was out of sight in no time, which left Lily alone with Potter. As herself.

Shit shit shit, why had she come here?

Potter cleared his throat, his foot tapping incessantly against the table pedestal.

“So, er…macarons,” he said. “Those are brilliant.”

“Er, yeah, they really are.”

Lily took another bite. If it weren’t for her newfound love for these macarons, she’d have shoved it in her mouth and bolted out the door.

“I, er, didn’t think you were allowed to eat many sweets,” said Potter.

“I’m not, really, but today…”

He frowned. “Did something happen? Are you all right?”

“Yeah, no, I’m…I’m all right. Really.” And she was, thanks to another Potter. “I just wanted something nice today. And, er.”

Potter really was such a better listener than she’d long given him credit for. A better person, really.

“As long as you’re here,” she said. “I mean, I thought I might as well say that…well, that day with Bonnie, and me, in the corridor…I thought that was really decent of you.”

“Threatening you was decent?”

“No, the, um, part where you were…being nice to her.”

“What, that? That wasn’t—I mean, really, it doesn’t…um, thanks. Thanks is what I mean.”

Lines zipped into existence between the dots in Lily’s brain.

“Oh,” she said, feeling very distant all of a sudden. “Are you and Bonnie—maybe I really shouldn’t have listened in at all—”
“No!” He coughed and continued in a lower register, “I mean, no, she and I—it wasn’t because I’m, you know, anything with her, just that she was the latest akuma victim, and, you know, that’s rough…”

“The latest? Have you done that for victims before?”

“Not for all of them—just, like, the ones at Hogwarts. And, er, just since McNamee, so, you know.”

“Potter, that’s almost since the beginning.”

“Oh, er, is it? I sort of lost track…plus, that one with McNamee really doesn’t count, I was so rubbish at it…”

“You did really well with Bonnie, though.”

His elbow came up as he clasped the back of his neck. “D’you think? I really have no clue what I’m doing…besides McNamee punching me in the ribs, I haven’t got much feedback…”

“James.” Lily looked down, and fiddled with the loose ribbon around the base of her macaron box. “You were…you don’t need to worry about whether you’re any good. You are. Promise.”

“Oh.” His cheeks had turned vaguely pink. “Thanks.”

Her fiendish cheeks took it upon themselves to match his. “You’re welcome.”

She still had three bites left.

She had to keep talking. That, or risk Euphemia Potter’s wrath by running out the door.

Sitting in silence was an option, too, though. And that was what they transitioned to, at least for a bit, Lily chewing on her macaron, while James very studiously examined the people passing by the window.

“So,” Lily said at last. “You were right.”

“You’ll have to be more specific.” It slipped out of him, and then his eyes went wide. “I mean—”

But her small laugh seemed to quiet him.

“There’s nothing wrong with being sure of yourself,” she told him. “Where it’s earned, anyway.”

“Oh.” Potter blinked. “If it’s self-assurance you’re after, you’ve definitely come to the right bakery.”

“Funny, I didn’t see that on the menu. Are you fresh out?”

“Mum made me take it off the menu because I put it on in the wrong font. What was I right about?”

“You can focus when you want to, can’t you?”

“I’m sorry, did you say something?”

She tapped a finger on the table. “That was too easy. Cleverer next time, please.”

“Shit, yeah, you’re right. That’s good. Keep a high standard, and all that.”

“Oh, I do. I definitely insist you keep up with me, Potter.”
He leaned forward, his forearms on the table. “I will, Evans, once you tell me what was I right about.”

“You’re like a kid being offered a biscuit. Nothing else matters right now, does it?”

“I might remind you that I live in a bloody bakery.” He gestured at the rest of the shop. “You think I ever had to work for one of these?”

“Point taken. What I was getting at—”

“Finally—”

“—is that you said this ‘bloody bakery’ was the best in Belgravia.”

“Oh. That. Well, yes, obviously I was right about that.”

“You’re welcome for the compliment.”

“Like I said, you came to the most self-assured bakery in the entire city. Compliments are unnecessary, but appreciated.”

She laughed. “There’s about two drops of modesty in you total, isn’t there?”

“Well, on the Potter family value scale—” He stopped, tensing. “I mean, er—three drops, really, and that’s it.”

Bloody hell—she was about to give herself away.

She bit down on the last piece of macaron. She had to thoroughly enjoy it, but once she’d licked the last of it from the insides of her gums, she started tying up her remaining macarons.

“I should get going,” she said. “My sister’s waiting for me.”

Petunia would certainly have things to say about Lily’s tardiness, but at this point, there wasn’t much new she could threaten. She’d already promised the worst. What was one more diatribe on top of the many existing layers of broken relationship?

“Oh,” said Potter, his smile sliding away. “All right.”

“Thank your mum for me, will you?”

“Er, for what?”

“For her marriage proposal.”

“Her what?” he squawked.

“Oh, come on, that was low-hanging fruit.” Lily stood up. “You should hold me to a higher standard, too, Potter.”

“Um. If you insist.”

“I really do.” She brushed a few crumbs off her skirt and picked up her macarons. “I’ll see you around, yeah?”

He scrambled to stand up. “Yeah,” he said as she walked past him to the door. “Yeah…see you.”
She let herself have one more glance back at Potter once she’d stepped outside. He was staring after her, apparently frozen, his mouth slightly agape.

She’d thought Potter had been taking the mickey when he talked about having a sensitive soul. But really, there was a reason girls were telling Potter they fancied him, wasn’t there? And it wasn’t just the hair.

Shit.

Shit.

She shook her head slightly and moved further away from the bakery, her stomach infested with non-akumatized moths.

Why, she wondered as she walked away quickly, was she so set on making her life even more complicated?

When Dorcas returned from her Christmas vacation, she invited Lily to get hot chocolate at their favorite café, where Lily told her about going to the hotel.

“You what,” Dorcas said.

“I had nowhere else to go.” Lily drew a swirl in her cocoa with her spoon. “And Sev didn’t even get angry with me for not talking to him for so long—”

“You had every right to be angry. To not talk to him.”

“Yeah, but I—I missed him.”

Dorcas blanched.

“Look,” Lily said. “You told me when we became friends that it was my life. That you’d respect my choices.”

“But he’s such a prick.”

“He can be, but he’s…he’s been my friend for so long.”

It was too much to give up on.

She stuck with him, even when he was territorial in choosing class seats choices or project partners… in everything but small stuff like who to eat lunch with. He still sat with his other mates, which worked out well. Lily got more time with Dorcas.

Dorcas, whom Severus kept trying to get Lily to ditch.

“You don’t need her,” he said. “She was a temporary solution.”

“I can have more than one friend,” Lily told him, and flung popcorn at him where he sat on his bed. “It’s fine.”

Things were in a weird balance. They might’ve worked out in the end. But then Potter slammed the hotel door on Lily, leaving her with the reluctant truth, and there was no more denying reality.

Sev had caused akuma attacks. A lot of akuma attacks,
Self-loathing hit her first, in a swift, strong punch to the gut.

Because she should have known. She should have guessed. She’d known that Severus could be unkind—that he didn’t like most people—that he could be scathing at the best of times—but still…

Self-loathing was burned away by wrath at the other students. Why had nobody told her—why had they let her live in ignorance—

But of course they hadn’t told her. She’d staked her defense of Severus so proudly that first day. She’d made it clear that to speak against Severus was to earn a lashing from Lily herself.

The other students, very reasonably, had likely assumed she already knew. They thought she knew and didn’t care. That she knew and stayed friends with Sev after he forced them into akuma-vulnerable states.

No wonder no one wanted to be friends with her until she stopped hanging around with him.

“Mary,” she said, opening her purse. “Mary, did you hear that?”

Mary peeked out. “Oh, Lily, I did.”

“Severus is the reason Hogwarts has so many villains. Sev. How could he be so—so…”

“Lily,” Mary said gently. “You know how.”

Lily pressed her hands over her eyes, her stomach twisted in knots. Why did life keep hurling these awful, wrenching moments at her? She wasn’t supposed to have to choose between friends. She wasn’t supposed to have friends that were so cruel. She wasn’t supposed to keep going through life losing the people that mattered most.

But she didn’t have time to bang her head against the wall right now. She had a villain to face. And a friend to confront.

“Mary,” she called, “spots on!”

Normally she didn’t notice the slight delay between activating the Miraculous and the moment it finished suiting her up, but today she had hot fury flooding through her veins. Even before the magic light finished encasing her feet, she was rushing out the door.

Poor Gloria had become Severus’s victim today, her work uniform transformed into a full-length ball gown in neon green. From halfway down the stairs, Lily watched Chat bounce around the room, dodging the glowing hotel keycards Gloria kept whipping at him. She missed every time, of course, even though Chat also had to contend with a puppetized Dorcas trying to pin him down.

Another villain capable of creating minions—just brilliant. The look of the day was apparently a garish red bellboy cap, one of which sat rakishly atop Dorcas’s head.

Chat’s staff tripped up Dorcas on the rug in front of the concierge desk. She sprawled onto her front with a growl. Instead of resuming his acrobatics like a sensible person, he stood there, cocking a grin at Dorcas.

Those show-off tactics usually sent Lily’s heart into its own acrobatics, but there was no time for theatrics right now.

Gloria drew another keycard from the stack in her hand, eyeing Chat. “You’ll all do as I say now.
And you, Chat Noir, will turn in your Miraculous!”

“I’d prefer,” he said, twirling his staff in front of himself in an inhumanly fast circle, “to remain in- dependent.”

From her spot on the ground, Dorcas yanked the rug out from under his feet. He yelped in surprise, stumbling back a couple steps, his arms flinging out for balance. Gloria seized the chance to grab another card, one that was sure to hit him.

Lily leaped down the remaining stairs in one bound, slinging her yo-yo forward to try to block the card, but she wouldn’t make it—

Remus leaped up from behind the concierge desk, launching himself in a slide over the top, his body flying in front of Chat just in time. Gloria’s card vanished into his chest. He shuddered as he dropped onto the floor, grasping at his shirt.

A bellboy cap popped into existence on his head.

Chat continued to spin his staff in his hands, backing away while Lily raced to stand at his side.

Remus was recovering now, and climbing to his feet, his face slack. Dorcas arose next to him.

“Three on two,” Chat said.

“Whatever will we do,” said Lily.

They grinned at each other.

With no more signal than that, they leaped into action. Chat jumped between Remus and Gloria, forcing Remus backwards, staff still spinning. Lily shot her yo-yo forward to try to ensnare Gloria’s arms, but Dorcas flung herself in front of Gloria.

Lily had to hand it to Dorcas and Remus, who managed to do a thorough job of protecting Gloria for a full minute. Only because Lily was pulling literal and metaphorical punches on Dorcas, but their creativity did deserve credit. At one point Dorcas grabbed the end of Lily’s yo-yo and started running for the front door, which was frustratingly ingenious—no one had ever done that before. Lily had run after her to rip it out of her hands.

When she turned back to Chat, Dorcas tied up in string behind her, Gloria had already made her escape.

Chat picked up a squirming Remus, and Lily lifted her ensnared friend above her head, and they locked them both in the back office.

Lily grimaced while they ran for the lifts. It was Severus’s fault she’d just had to fight her best friend. It was Severus’s fault Gloria was wreaking havoc.

Chat pushed the up button. “You’re awfully quiet today.”

“Got a few things on my mind, and sadly only one of them is you.” She glanced at him. “You were going easy on that bloke.”

“I had to back off. I didn’t want to be inn-disposed.”

“You already used the inn pun,” Lily said, slipping between the opening doors. “If you insist on using them, at least be original.”
He jabbed the button for the top floor. “I don’t know, I think my puns work on a few levels.”

Lily pretended to push the door-open button. “That’s it,” she said. “You’re on your own for this one. I quit.”

“That’s what got this whole mess started, you know.”

“What is?”

“I, er, picked up the story from someone who ran outside. Conci-urge was rowing with some bloke who was talking about quitting. Her minions are after him now.”

Lily’s fingers clenched into fists. “Did they catch him?” she asked, careful to sound neutral.

“No, he ran for the lifts. I assume it’s where she’s gone now. She sent her first minions after him.”

“At least you paid attention while coming up with those puns.”

He flexed his arms. “They come naturally. Like these guns.”

Her eyes lingered on the bulge of muscle beneath tight, black fabric. Lily’s breath, and the lift, stopped.

“Seems like the electricity between us short-circuited the lift,” she said, tearing her eyes away from his bite-worthy biceps.

This was not the time. She had a former friend to save and then personally eviscerate.

The doors opened to reveal Peter Pettigrew.

“Pe—rson,” said Chat. “Hello, random person. Going up?”

Peter slapped a hand over the lift door to keep it from sliding shut. “Mayor Riddle sent me to bring you to him!”

Lily turned to Chat. “D’you hear that, Chat? The Mayor himself wants to see us.”

“Never mind his hotel guests and staff getting controlled by an evil villain,” Chat said. “The mayor himself requires our presence immediately!”

“And for undisclosed reasons, too. We’d better drop everything, including the purpose of our very existence, in order to placate a gentleman who said—oh, do remind me, Chat...”

“Are you thinking of the time he accused us of having ulterior motives? Or the time he then said we weren’t doing a good enough job at stopping Voldemort?”

“I was thinking of the time he scolded us for hiding our identities from the authorities.”

“Oh, yes, how could I forget?”

“Please,” Peter said. “I’m being graded on my effort at being his assistant today. If you don’t come, I think he’ll tell my teacher I didn’t try hard enough.”

“We’re sorry,” Lily said, just as Chat said, “Well, all right, then.”

He started walking out of the elevator but she reached out to yank on his tail.
“Chat, we don’t have time. We’ve got to stop Conci-urge.” And frame Riddle for Severus’s murder, she did not add.

Chat made a whining noise, but he did slide his foot back into the elevator.

“You’re a cat, not a dog, now come on.” She pushed the door close button. “Sorry, er...”

“Peter. Or, er, Pete, if you like.”

“We’d love to stay and call you all manner of nicknames,” Chat said, “but we really can’t delay a fight with evil. You know how it goes.”

Peter reluctantly removed his hand from the elevator door. “Right, then. Thanks anyway.”

The lift continued its climb.

“You are focused today, aren’t you?” Chat said.

“Very,” she ground out.

Lily had never wanted the villain to extract justice before. What would Gloria even do if she found Severus? Enslave him? Maybe it would be better to let things play out more before they ended the fight, let Severus learn a little lesson...

But no, he would never learn. That much was clear by now.

Upstairs, they silently tracked a bellboy-hat-festooned Rookwood to the hotel’s poshest suite. The door opened the wrong way for Lily and Chat to catch a glimpse inside.

“Bet you he’s not the only minion in there,” Chat said, pulling his head back from around the corner. “Too risky to barge in there.”

“We need to scope out how many,” Lily said. “Follow me.”

She led him down the corridor and around a corner to the stairwell labeled Roof – restricted access.

“How’d you know where this was?” he asked.

Severus had brought her up there once, stolen the key from the cleaning cart and taken Lily up to gaze out over London.

Thinking about it now, someone had probably got in trouble for losing their keys. And Severus probably hadn’t cared.

The bastard.

“Lucky guess,” Lily said. “There had to be one somewhere, right? Now tear down this door.”

Chat decimated the locked door with Cataclysm, turning it into black dust with one swipe, and then gestured toward the revealed stairs. “Ladybugs first.”

Within a minute, Lily had wrapped her hands and legs around Chat’s elongated staff at the edge of the roof. He slowly lowered her down the side of the building, head-first, just far enough to peek into Gloria’s suite. Lily’s heart raced—if her grip failed her, she’d smash onto the pavement seven stories below.
But Chat wouldn’t let her fall, and her suit wouldn’t let her slide.

Gloria sat inside on a throne-like chair, with Avery and Rookwood fanning her. Where they’d found giant palms or the throne remained a question, but villains always did find extraordinary ways to meet their goals. On Gloria’s other side, Stefan and Helena Hodge stood still holding plates of sliced fruits and meats. Several more students and guests kneeled nearby, seemingly awaiting instruction.

There was no sign of Severus. He was probably hiding, the coward.

“You look dead angry,” Chat said when he pulled her back up to the roof.

Lily couldn’t get into it, so she just explained what she’d seen.

Chat said, “Sounds like she’s living out her suite dreams.”

His stupid puns should not have cheered her up. They didn’t, not entirely, but she found herself fighting against a tiny smile.

“Just for that sin against the English language,” she said, “you get to be the distraction.”

“Whatever my lady needs.”

He’d started calling her that unprompted one day, completely out of nowhere, and it sent her heart flipping every time.

“Your lady was thinking,” she said, “you could always go visit Mayor Riddle. To appease that Peter bloke.”

“Ah, yes. I could. Perhaps bringing an angry, enslaved army along with me to his office.”

“I think it’s only fair we give Riddle a chance to help with the fight, don’t you?”

“Have I mentioned that you are thoroughly brilliant?” His ring chirped. “Except for that part of the plan.”

“Are you angry with me for setting high expectations?”

“Nope,” he said, grinning at her. “Not in the least.”

They parted ways at the bottom of the stairwell. Chat flung open the suite door, hollered, “Come and get it!” and immediately took off running.

Most of the enslaved victims in the room darted out after him. Lily called on her superpower Lucky Charm, received a bottle of extra sticky hairspray from the sparkly magic, and charged into the room. Three minions and one villain Lily could handle. Within minutes she had smashed the brooch Gloria wore on her gown, the keycards in Gloria’s hand all stuck together by hairspray.

There was still no Severus, but at least Gloria was freed from Voldemort’s will.

Lily stayed longer than she should have to give Gloria a hug. Poor Gloria, whose first concern was whether she’d seriously hurt anyone.

“No,” said Lily. “Not remotely. It wasn’t your fault and you’re not to blame, okay?”

Her earrings beeped—two minutes.
One task done, she thought. One more left to do.

She ran for the room where Potter had left her, slamming the door shut just as her magic suit wore off. This time she waited until the magic had disappeared entirely before yanking the door open.

Potter stood in front of her, fist raised for a knock.

“Oh,” he said, dropping his hand. “You’re okay.”

“Of course I am. Ladybug fixed everything.” She looked past him, ready to go find Severus and make him pay.

“Well, yeah, but I...I didn’t think you’d stay in the room, to be honest. You seem like the type to be in the thick of it.”

Lily took a small step back. “Yes, well, erm, I thought...that I’d better leave it to the heroes.”

The words burned as they left her mouth.

“Um...right,” said Potter. “If you’re all right, then I’ve got to go check on my mates.”

“Yes,” Lily said tightly. “So do I.”

They walked together down to the lobby, where everyone was congregating. Dorcas saluted Lily from her seat on the concierge desk, her feet dangling in the air.

Potter ran over to his mates, but Lily’s eyes searched for Severus.

There, near the front door, talking to Riddle.

Lily marched over.

“—intend to make your response clear,” Severus was saying to Riddle.

“Believe me, I do not intend to allow this sort of behavior from my staff.”

“If you’d heard the way she spoke to me—”

“Rest assured,” Riddle said, then stopped as Lily stormed up. “Miss Evans. It’s been some time.”

Lily lifted her chin. “Mayor Riddle.”

His eyes swept over her. “I don’t believe I’ve noticed those earrings on you before. Unusual, aren’t they?”

Her hands nearly launched up to cover her earlobes. She usually wore her hair down to shield them, but she’d thoughtlessly tied it up in a ponytail for housekeeping duty.

“Not really,” she said. “Are you going to fire Gloria?”

“That’s not a concern for you to be worrying about, Miss Evans.”

“It’s not her fault she was provoked—”

“Our profession requires a level of self-control that Miss Gonzalez unfortunately lacks.”

Lily faced Severus. “And you’re going to let him do this, are you? When you—”
Riddle raised a hand. “I believe this conversation no longer requires my presence.” He nodded at Severus. “Snape,” he said by way of goodbye. “Miss Evans.”

He strolled away, perfectly at ease, even humming faintly.

It was creepy.

Severus spoke at once. “I did nothing. Gonzalez chose to respond as she did. She made herself vulnerable to attack, knowing perfectly well what letting herself descend to those petty emotions would make her susceptible to—”

“You didn’t have to make her cry!”

“You think it’s escaped my notice that you came back down to the lobby with Potter? You’re willing to believe his biased perception of events over mine?”

“For your information, he almost didn’t tell me anything. I actually think he wanted to spare my feelings, which is more than you’ve ever done—”

“You think he was playing the hero? You think he’d put anyone above himself and his friends?”

“Potter might be an arrogant toerag, but at least he had the decency to worry about the fact that you’ve been hurting people’s feelings left and right, turning half our class into akuma victims—”

“You can’t listen to him, Lily, I won’t let you—”

Her eyes narrowed. The world seemed to freeze around her as everything but Severus faded to a cool blur. “Let me? Let me?”

“I didn’t mean—I just don’t want to see you made a fool of—”

“I’ve been a fool but not because of him—at least Potter came and made sure I knew there was a villain. Where were you, Severus? Hiding like a coward from the villain you caused—”

“Don’t call me coward, you cunt!”

Ice slid into Lily’s heart. “What did you just call me?”

Severus was wide-eyed at his own words. “It slipped out! I didn’t mean it!”

Her anger had always been raging hot, an inferno quickly started, but not here. Today, she was chilled through.

“It’s too late, Snivellus. I’ve made excuses for you all year. No one in this school understands why I even talk to you, not even your awful friends. So I can’t pretend anymore. You’ve chosen your way, I’ve chosen mine.”

“No—listen, I didn’t mean—”

“Goodbye, Severus.”

She spun away, ponytail flying, and strode over to a fiercely grinning Dorcas. Lily plopped herself on the concierge desk next to her, heart pounding as Dorcas slid an arm around her shoulders.

Lily had always thought leaving Severus behind for good would hurt more. It did hurt, somewhere beneath that layer of ice, but not as much as she would have guessed.
She risked a glance around and saw several smirks among her classmates, all directed at Severus. She might have felt the slightest bit of guilt if she’d said anything she regretted. But she did not.

This was it, then. It was over. And all because of Potter.

Potter, who was shaking Peter Pettigrew’s shoulders.

“What happened there?” Lily asked.

“Pettigrew got offered a real job with Riddle,” said Dorcas.

“Him?”

Dorcas removed her arm from Lily’s shoulders. “I heard from Rhonda Roper that Riddle asked Pettigrew to fetch Ladybug and Chat Noir. He got one of them, at least, plus a bunch of people under Conci-urge’s control.”

“What did Riddle want with Chat Noir and Ladybug?”

“Don’t know, don’t care. Rhonda said they all got freed by Ladybug right after Chat led them straight to Riddle, Pettigrew, and Snape.”

Potter had given up on shaking Peter to stick his hands in his own hair.

“Him?” he said loudly.

Dorcas nudged Lily, who stopped staring, her cheeks tinged red.

“Thanks,” Lily said. “For not giving up on me.”

Dorcas shrugged. “You’ve always had sense. You just needed to use it the right way.”

Severus was ranting to Mulciber and Avery near the front doors, but it was no longer Lily’s concern.

She smiled at Dorcas. “Sense used. If I start slipping again, though—”

“You won’t.”

Lily looked at Severus one final time. “No,” she said. “You’re right. I won’t.”

Severus Snape marched up to Riddle’s office and flung the door open.

“Yes?” he sneered, arms crossed.

Seated behind his desk, Riddle set his tea cup in its saucer. “Don’t ever presume you may take that tone with me.”

Snape ducked his head, and shuffled into the room. “My apologies.”

“Yes, well, it’s forgiven due to the circumstances. I realize the ire is not directed at me.”

That set Snape off anew.

“It’s all Potter’s fault,” he said heatedly, striding toward the chairs in front of Riddle’s desk. “He’s filled her head with poison—”
“Snape.”

Snape clamped his mouth shut and dropped into one of the seats.

“I did not summon you because I wished to indulge your incessant whinging. I expect more mature behavior from someone in as trusted a position as yourself.”

Snape fidgeted. “Of course.”

“Now. If that’s understood, I did summon you for rather more significant reasons.”

“Yes?”

“I trust that with certain unsavory elements removed from your life—”

Snape’s shoulder twitched.

“—that you will have more time to dedicate to worthwhile pursuits.” Riddle rolled his chair backwards and smoothly climbed to his feet. “Malfoy reports your blog traffic is at an all-time high.”

“I’m pleased to report that it is. Every day more Londoners demand the truth of Ladybug’s and Chat Noir’s identities.”

“And you’ve shown me nothing but unwavering loyalty, Snape. Don’t think I have ever underestimated the value of loyalty.” Riddle raised his hands in front of his chest, pressing his fingertips together. “I believe we’ve reached a threshold, Severus. A test, if you will.”

Severus watched avidly as Riddle strolled around his desk toward a dark wooden bookcase.

“Given your level of commitment, and the assets you bring to the cause, I should like to lower the veil on something I’ve kept hidden from you.”

“Mr. Riddle?”

Riddle’s mouth slid into an angled line, a sly, curious sort of smile. “While that’s one name I go by,” he said, “I should like to share with you another…”
The months after Conci-urge could have involved James trying harder to get Lily’s attention...but they didn’t. She’d made it clear in the hotel what she thought of him: an arrogant, rich, spoiled braggart.

Did he go home that night and drown himself in chocolate cake? Of course. But right after that—all right, several weeks later—he resigned himself to living off the brief interactions with her at school.

These exchanges typically went like this:

“Lily.”

“Potter.”

With the occasional “You dropped this” or “Excuse me.”

He took satisfaction in seeing her abandon Snape for good; in seeing her growing friendship with Meadowes; in seeing their classmates giving her the time of day again. The last one took longer this time—she’d burned them before—but it did happen eventually.

She still stuck closest to Meadowes, and James didn’t miss what a good mate Meadowes was to her. After the hotel incident, James snuck some biscuits into her bag when she wasn’t looking. She’d fully earned them.

And so life went on until Lily visited the bakery.

He still wasn’t over that. Neither was his mum, who was now convinced James should give up on his new paramour because Lily Evans clearly fancied him.

But that couldn’t be right. There was no reason for her to suddenly think better of him after months of dislike and then months of apparent neutrality.

He actually kind of hoped Ladybug would show up again so he could talk it through with her...although that wasn’t fair either because she was part of the problem.

Well, not problem. Situation, really.

The situation would have been easier to deal with if he’d had someone decent to talk to about it. Fortunately, having to tell Peter his secret identity provided a terrific opportunity for James to finally bring all three of his friends into the loop.

“I know you’re Chat Noir,” said Remus. “Why do you think I’m always throwing myself in front of you during akuma attacks?”

James crossed his arms. “Because I thought we were friends, but obviously I was grossly mistaken.”

Peter snapped out of his initial dazed reaction. “You’re Chat Noir?”

“Seems you’re the only one who didn’t know,” Sirius told him.

“Did you know Remus knew?” James asked Sirius.

“Suspected. No proof one way or the other.”
“Some of us,” Remus said, “are capable of keeping secrets.”

“I regularly save the city,” James lamented, “and all I get in return are veiled insults.”

Peter demanded to be shown a transformation, and Remus tried to interrogate Algernon about magic, but only Peter got what he wanted.

Eventually they circled around to the important piece: that Peter analyze the locations of akuma attacks.

Peter agreed at once and with enthusiasm.

“Good,” James said. “Now, Remus, as the only sensible one in the group—”

“Oi,” said Sirius.

“—help me with my woman problems.”

“This is it,” Remus said. “This is why you’ve told me you’re Chat Noir, isn’t it?”

“No,” James lied. “It’s because if three of us knew, that would seem wrong. Besides, we’ll catch Voldemort soon, and I’d’ve told you then anyway.”

“Three of you did know,” Peter said meekly.

James waved a hand. “Not my fault.”

“Yes,” said Remus. “You were very stealthy with your never-ending bathroom breaks at school. And your vocal love of Chat Noir. And your eviction from the football team. How could anyone have ever have guessed that you, James Potter, were superhero Chat Noir—”

“I regret telling you.”

“Excellent, because I’ve no womanly advice to dispense.”

“I can’t believe I have three friends—”

“And only three,” Sirius said.

“—and not one willing to help me out here.”

Peter raised a hand. “I’ll help.”

“Like I said, no one to help. This is absolute rubbish.”

At least Peter was a mate in offering to do the analysis—he promised to get it to James within the next day or so.

That settled that. But on the more important issue, the Lily-Ladybug front, James was left to his own meager devices.

He thought he’d have some time to sort it through before being forced to confront it. Because his life was a comedy, though—or so he hoped, given the alternative—he found himself alone again with Lily Evans the very next day.

He’d skived off an exam to battle an akuma, and had to stay late to make it up. Alone, he had
presumed, until Lily Evans walked in.

“Hi,” James said, the word coming out much too breathy and desperate.

“Hiya.”

“Hello.”

McGonagall cleared her throat. “If you’re quite finished,” she said, and held up copies of the exam.

Lily had probably missed the exam for a model thing, which seemed to pull her out of class almost as often as James went off to fight evil.

She snatched a copy of the exam from McGonagall and hurried to take a seat a reasonable distance from James.

The distance didn’t matter, though. English was a soft subject, but James could barely remember the plot of Twelfth Night when he kept finding his gaze drawn to Lily.

The first time he caught her looking back, his heart quickened. The second time he dropped his pencil. The third he forgot the name of the play. After that he gave up on acing the test, and settled for a passing grade. But what did grades matter when Lily Evans was looking at him?

He probably had pen on his face.

He and Lily handed in their papers at the same time; her answers looked as pathetically short as his own.

They shared an awkward “no, after you” dance at the door, which led to both of them standing resolutely inside insisting the other go first, until McGonagall called out, “For the love of god, Potter, just go first.”

He did.

They both stopped outside the classroom, Lily closing the door behind her.

“Hi,” James said. “Shit, we already covered that, didn’t we? I’m sorry, you wanted to hold me to a high standard, and I’m bollocking it up.”

It was really warm in the school that day. Her cheeks looked vaguely red.

“Well,” she said, “I’m not exactly the most eloquent myself today, am I?”

“Oh, no, you’re always brilliant. I mean, like really brilliant, and I’m always rambling on about nonsense, aren’t I, not making brilliant points like you because you’re...brilliant.”

“For someone I thought liked words, that was an atrocious sentence.”

“And I have no excuse. Sorry to disappoint. I’m usually much better, promise.”

Her fingers tightened around the grip of her schoolbag. Her nails were pink.

“What’s so different right now, then?” she asked.
“Oh, you know...um.”

Was she really fishing? There didn’t seem to be any other explanation. And her eyes were so large and green and he needed to answer her sometime soon.

“Did I mention you were brilliant?” he offered.

“And you feel like you can’t keep up with me? I got a different impression at the bakery.”

They’d had a good rapport then, hadn’t they? It shouldn’t have been so hard to get back to that balance now. She didn’t hate him. That much was clear.

“This is me officially trying to do better,” he said. “So, um. Pretend I said something brilliant here to save my ego, please.”

“Left your self-assurance in your other trousers?”

“Also my wallet. Had to bum off Sirius for lunch today.”

She laughed, sending James’s heart skittering.

“Now that’s an outright lie,” she said. “I saw you buy your lunch.”

“Keeping tabs on me, eh?”

His mouth had sent him to detention so many times, and now it seemed poised to cockblock him.

But miraculously, Lily bit her lip and looked to the side.

“No,” she very clearly lied.

This wasn’t possible. This wasn’t happening. For months he’d prayed for the slightest sign from her. He’d all but given up to start thinking about Ladybug, another devastatingly brilliant girl, and now Lily Evans was watching him at lunch—and during tests—

He really, really hoped he was in a comedy.

“I thought,” he said, “we were holding each other to a high standard.”

“All right,” she conceded, turning redder. “Maybe I have been keeping tabs on you a bit. You’ve got a habit of drawing attention.”

“Someone once told me they found it difficult to believe I’d ever been in a room without drawing at least fifty percent of the attention to myself.”

She grinned. “Wise woman, that one.”

“She is pretty brilliant, yeah. Not as brilliant as you, though.”

“Back to brilliant, are we?”

“No, right, sorry. I promised I’d do better. How else would you like me to compliment you?”

Oh, this was dangerous. This was so close to showing his hand. But she’d tilted her cards at him earlier, and how could he not show his back...

She tapped a finger to her lips. “I am a model, which makes physical compliments a little less
“You’re really funny,” he said. “Not that you and I—I mean, besides at the bakery—but I’ve heard you and, er, yeah. Think you’re dead witty. When you let yourself be, anyway.”

“Hm. Standard met, Potter.”

“And you’ve got good taste in pens.”

“What?”

“I noticed, once, that we’ve got the same pens...sorry, I’m not at all on top of my game today.”

“Take a point for originality, at least. Taste in pens is a good stand-in for overall taste, I think.”

How surreal, to stand in a corridor with afternoon light streaming in from the high windows above, to talk to Lily Evans, to offer her compliments and to have them accepted...

This really had the potential for tragedy. He could easily end up alone and with two broken legs or something. He really shouldn’t have tempted fate by pushing things with Lily, not when he had a perfectly wonderful girl waiting for him to say he wanted her...

But god, how was he supposed to resist Lily Evans paying attention to him? Ladybug was brilliant, and funny, and straightforward, and brave, and—and a lot like Lily Evans, really. He certainly had a type.

Only one of those types had actually kissed him, though. Had actually told him, unwittingly, how much she thought of him. Only one of them was a sure thing...and yes, Lily Evans was the one he’d waited for, pined for, supported from afar. But Ladybug was the one he’d saved London with. The one he shared a mind with. The one who could relate to the life-changing experience of being a superhero.

Lily knew him better, in some ways. She’d seen the worst of him and was, at long last, appearing to overcome that.

But he was probably reading too much into the looking. She’d said so little in return...

“How’s my face?” he asked.

“Sorry?”

“I love the pens but I wondered if I got some on there...”

She peered at his face. “Er, no, I don’t think so.”

“Must be all this handsome drawing your attention, then,” he said, feeling like he was flying, that moment of weightlessness at the top of a roof-bounding leap. “It’s no big deal. It happens to a lot of girls. Last year McGonagall made me put a paper bag on my head for a class.”

The corner of her mouth twitched up. “McGonagall said that it was because you were too handsome, did she?”

“Not explicitly, but why else would she pick me for that activity? Sure, we were studying *A Tale of Two Cities* and masks and all that, but truly, I think we can all infer what she intended by covering up this face.”
“I lied. It wasn’t your handsomeness, it was some pen.”

She took a step closer, until her chest almost brushed up against his. Then, in what felt like slow motion, she raised a thumb up to James’s cheek.

His breath hitched.

Her finger didn’t land at once. She seemed to be stuck herself, her eyes riveted to his, her thumb lingering over his face.

He could smell her perfume and appreciate the few faint freckles on her nose and feel her gentle breath on his face—his heart thundered against his ribs—

The thought popped into his head that he’d been using a pencil for the test.

Time ran in a loop, nothing existed but him and the inexplicable, unanticipated nearness of Lily Evans’s face to his—

The door opened behind her and knocked against her back. She stumbled forward, her chest connecting with his, her finger jabbing against his cheek. His foot stepped back to catch his weight, but he just kept tipping, his torso too far gone over his hips—

It was to be tragedy, then—

Her arm slipped around the small of his back to catch him. He lay at an angle, one foot off the ground, one hand clinging to Lily’s upper arm. To McGonagall, who stepped out of the classroom with an apology, it probably looked like Lily was dipping James.

Lily held him easily. She had some serious muscles hidden under that uniform.

Their faces were even closer together now, their noses nearly touching.

And actually…this position didn’t feel that unfamiliar. Which was weird. But on some level he knew this grip, this strength, this—intimacy.

It made no sense. Maybe he’d got to know her enough that there was no awkward-touch phase for them. Maybe he and Lily really did have that amazing of chemistry, that their bodies would be so welcoming to one another. She’d known exactly how to catch him. She hadn’t so much as hesitated, just slipped into recovery mode, keeping him from injury.

She helped him up to his feet, her hands swift and sure. It might have been pure modeling grace and muscle that saved him, but all James knew for certain was that electricity still hummed through him, his skin hyperaware of the continuing closeness of Lily.

“Are you all right?” McGonagall asked.

“Fine,” James breathed, unable to look away from Lily yet. “So fine you have no idea.”

McGonagall said: “Ahem.”

Lily stepped away from James at the same moment he moved away from her.

“No harm done,” Lily told McGonagall. “We were just leaving.”

She grabbed James’s hand.
His brain spasmed.

This tied with Ladybug’s kiss for the most sensual thing he had ever done with a girl. Handholding was nothing like a kiss in theory, but this was with Lily bloody Evans.

Again, though, the shape of her hand didn’t register as something new. Had he studied it enough that he knew the intricacies of it from sight alone? That was a little creepy.

McGonagall shot him a stern look as he and Lily walked past hand in hand and James was never washing this hand again. He briefly debated cutting it off and having it taxidermized for true preservation.

But then he and Lily were past McGonagall, and his hand was his own again.

“So,” Lily said, as they kept heading for the front doors.

“So,” he agreed.

Like they hadn’t just been—whatever it was they’d almost been doing.

His pulse still thrummed.

“You, er, going home, then?” she asked.

“Yeah. You?”

She sighed. “Nowhere else to go.”

“Walk me home?”

His mouth was in perilous territory again.

She smiled, a shy, half-hidden thing.

“Yeah,” she said. “Yeah, all right.”

James might have been imagining that they were walking a little closer than two people normally did.

Being near her was so exhilarating, but also so annoyingly familiar...like he was near Sirius...a casual, easy closeness that didn’t set off his personal bubble sensor.

They made it to the school’s front steps without another word, but the silence was all right. He could savor what might be a once in a lifetime opportunity to be happily near her. To etch the memory of her hand and her freckles and her strength into his long-term memory.

Once they’d passed through the doors, she said, “I had another thank-you to deliver. About the day in the hotel. With Severus.”

“Um,” said James.

His most vivid memories from that day were their stilted conversation, and when she called him an arrogant toerag in front of their whole class. If she hadn’t been ending things with Severus while doing the second part, he would’ve counted the day as a total wash.

“I wanted to say thanks,” she said, “because you—you told me. In a way. That he was causing them. And you didn’t...you weren’t an arse about it.”
“Oh,” he said. “That?”

“Yes, that. That was...I know everyone thought I must have known. But I didn’t—or I didn’t want to put it together myself...but I wish I’d known sooner. Severus, he—he was there for me a lot, which I know you don’t believe, but he had his good moments. Things were complicated and I—I’m sorry, I’m rambling, I just wanted to say thanks for not being afraid to tell me.”

“Oh,” he said. And then, “I’d’ve told you sooner if I’d known you didn’t know... I mean, probably.”

“I wouldn’t have listened.”

“Well...no, there’s that. And like, probably rightfully so.” He bumped an arm against hers. “Whatever. Things worked out, didn’t they?”

“Except that Voldemort is still out there, and I know Severus is still causing more villains...and it’s funny because he and I would probably still be friends if it weren’t for Voldemort.”

“Then I can’t believe I’m about to say this, but cheers to Voldemort.”

She let out a loud, single laugh. “Pathetic, isn’t it, that it took Voldemort to get me there.”

“No,” James said quietly. “Not pathetic at all. You’re a loyal friend.”

She smiled at him as they turned a corner, passing a news vendor. The sun was bright and gleaming and he was an idiot, but Lily hadn’t run off yet. She was smiling at him.

“You’re lucky,” she said, “that you’ve got such good mates. I mean, Black’s a prick, but still.”

“He’s like a brother, only better.” Daring idiot that he was, he brushed his arm against hers again. “And you’re lucky to have Meadowes.”

“She’s brilliant—”

“Sorry, no, I’ve already maxed out that word for this conversation.”

“Right, of course. Standards. Then I’ll say she’s lovely, but we’re still...it’s only been like six months. So it’s not like I can talk about everything with her.”

They stopped in front of the bakery. This was the end of their agreed upon time, this was the end of the best moments of James’s life—

His self-sabotaging mouth said: “You can talk to me.”

Time drew to an agonizing halt.

She said, “I know.”

After months of thirsting for any drop of attention from her, he was now drowning. Physical touch— compliments, going both ways—her laughing and smiling and walking him home.

How was he supposed to finish falling for Ladybug when Lily Evans said things like that? When she looked at him with something like fondness, or trust?

“Good,” he said weakly. “Good, that’s, like, really good...”
She went pink as she said, “You’ve maxed out on that one, too, now.”

She demanded more of him. She wanted him to do his absolute best. And every time she called him on something, a wonderful warmth filled his chest, a sense of rightness.

Just like when he and Ladybug could plan out an attack without speaking.

Shit. He was so fucking. He was so **fucked**—

“You want to come in?” he asked. “I bet my mum will send you off with a whole cake this time.”

Her eyes lingered on the storefront. “I wish I could...but I shouldn’t.”

“You said you’ve got nothing better to do than go home.”

“Yeah, but my sister, she’s…really picky about the time I get home.”

“Why?”

God, he never could shut up, could he? But she kept talking, instead of telling him to piss off.

“Because she’s—worried. Or controlling, really, and I think it’s mostly that…I hope it’s a little bit of worry because otherwise… Sorry, I’m so rambly today, this is just me dumping on you—”

“I really, really don’t mind. Not remotely. Not the tiniest sliver of minding.”

“But you—this has been all about me, hasn’t it, it’s not fair at all.”

“You raise an excellent point,” James said. “But I think I know how you can even the score.” He hadn’t even thought through what he would suggest. The large, obvious part of his brain said **KISS ME**, but another part said: “Come back tomorrow.”

“Here?”

“To the troll cave under Southwark Bridge. Yes, here.”

He could tell her now, he realized. He could say he was Chat Noir. She would only think well of him for it, and maybe she’d be so impressed that she’d kiss him without him having to ask for it...

That would really muddle things between him and Ladybug, though. Not to mention that even though Lily had been adamant that Chat and Ladybug weren’t dating, she’d definitely seen the news item. She might be put off if she thought there was a chance he was involved with someone else.

“Tomorrow I’ll tell you my second deepest, darkest secret,” he said. “That’ll even things out.”

“Not the deepest?”

“I can tell you that in like…a month, maybe. But for now, the second deepest.”

He was willing to sacrifice his shameful middle name for her. The lengths to which he was willing to go…but it was so worth it because she was smiling at him again.

It was like getting hit by a superpowered sunbeam—which was what Lucinda Zheng’s akuma power had been, and this was exactly like it—unbelievably warm without scorching, heating him from the inside out.
“All right,” Lily said.

“Good—I mean, er…dead good. Shit.”

She took a step backwards away from him, her smile crooking sly. “Stupendous. Terrific. Wonderful. I could keep going.”

“Now you’re just mocking me.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I am. Got a problem with it?”

He let out a tiny, happy noise. “Not in the slightest.”

“Good,” she said. “See you later, Potter.”

“Yeah,” he sighed as she turned away. “Later.”

He watched her head down the block because he couldn’t help it. She had a very graceful walk, of course, perfect posture, fitting for a model. She stopped at the corner to turn back to him. When she saw him looking, she offered a faint half-wave, lingered, and then moved out of sight.

He heaved an enormous, pleased breath, falling back against the bakery door. It opened slowly behind him, and he straightened up to walk inside properly.

His mum wolf-whistled at him.

“Mum,” he said dreamily, “is it possible to fancy two people at once?”

“Without a doubt. Absolutely.”

He collapsed into one of the chairs at the table, and let his bag drop to the floor.

“Well,” he said, “then I am absolutely fucked.”

“Mary,” Lily said, stretched out on her bed, “is it possible to fancy two people at once?”

“Of course it is,” Mary said, hovering overhead. “But you know you could hurt one or both of them if you’re not careful.”

“It’s Potter’s fault—I wasn’t so confused before he…he’s just so different. And idiotic but brilliant, you know? But Chat—I kissed him, and I think—I hope that he’s leaning my way…”

“If you want to be closer to James, you have to tell Chat things have changed.”

“Do I? I don’t know that either of them fancies me for sure…”

“James didn’t seem disinterested. And Chat seemed very interested last time you talked.”

“All right, let’s just say they both fancy me, and not just because I’m a model.” Lily propped herself up on her elbows. “What do I do then?”

“I think you already know the answer to that.”

Lily flopped back down and thumped her pillow over her face. “But I don’t want to choose.”

“Lily.”
She adjusted her pillow to uncover her mouth. “Severus would murder me if I actually went out with Potter.”

“That’s the least important thing in all of this.”

“I dunno, I rather fancy being alive.”

“Lily.” Mary perched on the back of Lily’s hand, on top of the pillow. “You know you don’t have to pick right now.”

“But I’m going to Potter’s tomorrow. And it—it’s not a date, really, is it?”

“It’s not a date unless you both agree it is.”

Lily squished the pillow further into her face.

This was all too much to take in. She might have to leave London. She might have to stop being Ladybug. She had a villain to catch and grades to keep up and a job to maintain and now two sodding boys to deal with.

If she were at all intelligent, she’d forget about both boys and focus on the important things.

Life, unfortunately, was not that simple.

Against her will, her gaze kept wandering over to Potter the next day at school. It couldn’t be helped. He made such adorable, embarrassed faces every time he caught her looking.

It should have been cloying. She was not such a sap as to fall for this.

But she kept doing it anyway.

Dorcas harrumphed when she noticed Lily looking, and sketched out tiny versions of Severus’s face with knitting needles poking out of his eyes.

“That’s just gruesome,” Lily said.

“I’m emotionally frustrated,” Dorcas said flatly. “I’ve got to take it out somehow.”

“What are you frustrated about? Something at home?”

Dorcas grumbled and walked away.

Lily, for her part, kept ticking down the hours until she was supposed to go to Potter’s.

What would they even do together—sit around and eat macarons? What would Chat say if he knew she was eating biscuits with another boy? And what lie would she have to tell Petunia to justify coming home late again?

Twenty minutes before class let out for the day, her phone vibrated.

“No,” she whispered.

But duty called. Brunhilda Carmichael herself had been akumatized after receiving a particularly nasty review on her latest album.

This was unfair on so many counts. Lily would be late to Potter’s, for one, and for another, she’d
have to face Chat knowing she was supposed to be with James.

When Chat landed at her side with a *My lady*, she gulped.

He grasped her hand, lifted it, and brushed his lips over her knuckles.

“*Chaton,*” she breathed.

Why had she ever thought that Potter was an option when Chat still existed? Why had she ever let her eyes stray anywhere but that raggedy mess of hair and that roguish grin? Eight long months she’d waited for him to do something like this and now it was happening, *it was happening—*

Brunhilda Carmichael opened her mouth and belted out a high note, as well as a stream of violently purple light, right at Chat.

Lily grasped his hand and yanked him forward, crushing him against her chest. While she pulled him out of the beam’s path, one of his hands slid around her waist, while the other extended his staff, launching them up onto a rooftop.

“You’ll all love me!” Brunhilda shouted. “My songs make people fall in love!”

Chat’s arm remained firmly in place around Lily up on the roof. They touched each other constantly in this job, but usually Lily was able to focus on the work, and not the firm way his hand fitted into the dip of her waist, or how his untamable hair tickled against her cheek.

Usually.

Definitely not today. Definitely not when he shot her a crooked smile while their faces were close enough for her to appreciate the tiny, variegated streaks in his irises.

“What happens if the light hits us?” he asked.

Lily almost didn’t manage to answer. It felt too close to saying it for real.

Her heart beat out a staccato rhythm.

“You fall in love with the person nearest you,” she said. “And then the two of you become a fighting pair for her cause.”

He laughed softly, his warm chest pressing against hers. “Which is?”

“Nothing original: getting revenge on that critic.”

His lips quirked into a half smile just before he said, “What a treble-maker.”

That was enough to remind Lily that she had several other priorities besides sneakily enjoying the boyish scent of Chat. They had a villain to defeat. And after that, she had a—not a date, necessarily. But an appointment with Potter.

“I’m sure you’ve been saving them up in a piggy bank,” she said, stepping out of his embrace, “but I don’t have time for puns today. I’m supposed to be somewhere right now.”

“Me too, actually. Sounds like we don’t have a minuet to spare.”

“I can spare a minute to push you off a rooftop if you don’t stop with the puns.”
He waggled his eyebrows. “Only if you fall with me.” He paused. “Or for me, but you’ve already done that.”

If he’d made up his mind about her, she would’ve kissed him right then for being so adorably ridiculous, but she couldn’t. He hadn’t answered her original kiss of a question, and there was the issue of James Potter…

But Potter had to wait. Brunhilda’s love-struck couples proved surprisingly powerful. Whenever Chat or Lily subdued one half of a pair, the other flew at them screaming, ready to tear limbs.

To worsen matters, Brunhilda was, as she’d belted out in one of her top hits, a singing machine. She converted civilians with impressive speed, constantly expanding the scope of her army as she made her way toward the critic’s office.

If Lily weren’t due at Potter’s, this fight would have been more of a favorite. Fighting against other duos proved challenging, but not so difficult that she didn’t think they’d win in the end. And there were glorious moments with Chat, like when she dropped to a crouch and stuck out her interlaced hands to act as a springboard for him, that the warm perfection of their partnership washed through her.

Lily had no watch as Ladybug, but her muscles protested that she’d been bouncing around for much too long. The lengthening shadows of the city confirmed she’d been due at Potter’s hours ago. There was nothing to be done for it, though. Villains couldn’t wait.

Brunhilda’s army eventually had to contend with crossing the Thames, which narrowed down their potential paths and made it easier to plan a strategic attack.

The sun was bathing the city in gold as Lily raced ahead of Brunhilda. While Chat was off ensuring the army didn’t pick a different bridge, Lily swung up to the top of a rowhouse near Battersea Park to call on Lucky Charm.

“Oh, come on,” she said when her power gifted her with a radio that matched her suit. “Just once, couldn’t you give me something more obviously useful?”

She made a frustrated noise but set to work figuring out how the hell she was supposed to win a battle with a bleeding radio.

Brunhilda’s warbling voice hit a high note from nearby. Lily could hear the shuffling feet of her army a couple blocks over.

Of course. They were following the sound of her voice.

Lily spun the radio dial until a Brunhilda song came crackling out. Pushed to full, magical volume, it proved just the trick to lure the civilians away from their leader.

Once a sizeable amount of the army had started peeling off from the crowd, Lily headed out in search of Chat. She found him on a red brick home across from the park, eyes assessing the few pairs parading beneath him toward the bridge. Brunhilda still led the charge, head held high and completely oblivious to the ever-shrinking army behind her.

Chat shot Lily a smile. They didn’t need to announce their plans at this point.

At once, they both leaped off the roof. Lily let herself drop straight down two floors to a balcony, while Chat launched himself on a much longer arc, aimed to land exactly on his prey’s back—he would pin Brunhilda down, Lily would snatch the akuma-ridden microphone, and this would finally
Someone from inside the window behind Lily screamed.

Brunhilda whipped her head around just in time to open her tremendous mouth. Violet light shot into Chat’s face as he collided with her, tackling her to the street.

Shit shit shit. Lily was never going to end this fight with Chat compromised for the other side. And god, if Chat were forced to love someone else—if she had to watch another person receive his affection, she might not summon the energy to keep fighting—

But Chat was pinning Brunhilda’s wrists to the ground while she shrieked.

Lily jumped off the balcony and raced toward them, elbowing a love-struck man in the face to keep him out of her path.

Brunhilda’s thick fingers tried to fight Lily as she ripped the microphone away, but Brunhilda’s love of stardom had nothing on Miraculous-boosted strength.

The microphone smashed easily under Lily’s foot.

The normal post-fight rituals passed in a blur: Lily purified the akuma. Chat gave her a high-five. Brunhilda crooned a short thank-you to both of them.

But Lily’s brain was whirring. Chat should have been affected by Brunhilda. He should have fallen in love with the nearest person and fought against Lily, not held Brunhilda down. Then again, there hadn’t been anyone besides other victims in the vicinity. Except for Lily, of course—

She froze.

Brunhilda was still thanking them but everything outside of Lily’s mind was a hazy din, blurry and unimportant.

It wasn’t possible. It was much too early. He’d only just started thinking things through.

But what else could it have been?

Chat turned to Lily, rubbing the back of his neck. “So, um, I’ve got to run. I had this, um, thing, and I’m so stupidly late—probably too late…”

Potter was waiting for her.

And so was Petunia. The sun was just setting, its lingering rays gilding the tops of nearby buildings. This wasn’t even rebelliously late, it was actually-might-get-punished late.

There would be no visiting Potter tonight. He’d probably sat there waiting, hoping she’d swing by, wondering what he’d done to make her not show up. She’d be a terrible girlfriend for Potter, at least until they caught Voldemort. It was another tick in the column for Chat that she wouldn’t have to lie to him about where she kept disappearing to.

She knew it was pointless to think about all this because neither boy had officially indicated his interest. That didn’t stop her from going in circles on it all night, especially once Petunia grounded her to her room except for work and school.

She could have texted Potter an apology. Like a fool, though, she’d never actually got his number.
An ungodly early photo shoot the next morning kept her from stopping by the bakery, one that lasted most of the day. When she was at the top of her game, when she was truly fierce and focused, the shoots could end up to an hour early.

Today they ran an hour long.

“Stop looking so lovesick,” the photographer said. “That’s not what we’re going for here.” And then, soon after, “Stop that blushing!”

It was mortifying, really, but there was nothing to be done about it. She apologized profusely on her way out the door, and just barely had time to swing by the bakery on her way to meet Chat.

“James’ll be furious he missed you,” Euphemia said. “He just took off.”

Inside, Lily swore. Outside, she said, “Oh, er, thanks then.” She took a step toward the door before asking, “Was he…was he upset last night?”

“I couldn’t say—I was asleep before he came in.”

“Oh.” Lily frowned. “He wasn’t here yesterday afternoon?”

“Should he have been?”

“No, er, never mind. I thought we were—and then I had a family emergency—and I don’t have his number—”

“That’s easily fixed.”

Euphemia ripped off a strip of receipt tape and jotted down a number while Lily snuck another anxious look at her phone. She was due to see Chat in two minutes.

“Family is my third most important value,” Euphemia said, tucking the slip into Lily’s palm. “Family emergencies excuse anything.”

“Oh, er, good to know.” Lily hurried to the door. “Thanks!”

There was no way she’d misunderstood Potter about their meeting.

The nerve of that boy. Inviting her to walk him home—inviting her over to hang out with him—and then standing her up!

Fine, technically she’d stood him up in return, but at least she’d had a good excuse.

She must have been completely misreading him. Maybe he only wanted to be friends…but that still didn’t explain why he hadn’t been at the bakery.

At least she could forget about Potter for a bit now. She had another perfectly suitable bloke to go interact with, one who always made her smile.

By her estimate, she was only ten minutes behind schedule when she landed on the Hogwarts roof.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said.

“Better late than never.” He wore an easy smile on his face, and held a folded-up paper in his hand. “Thanks for not standing me up.”
“Were you really worried about that from me?”

“No, I know, I just—I was stood up yesterday.” Then he tacked on, “By a friend!”

She reached up to stroke one of his ears, savoring the way his body trembled. “Poor chaton. I know how you feel—the same thing happened to me yesterday.”

“Bad luck for both of us,” Chat managed. When his trembling had faded, he added, “I mean, I didn’t exactly show up to my thing either, since we were fighting evil, and all.”

“Same here, but there’s literally no better excuse than that. If we could just, like, tell them that was the reason.”

“We’re terrific at showing up to fight evil. And isn’t that what really matters?”

She slid a smile at him. “You know I’d never stand you up, chaton.”

“No,” he said, slowly, considering. “You wouldn’t, would you?” He took a half-step closer to her. “’Cause like, I know I can rely on you, and that’s dead brilliant. To be able to do that, I mean.”

The sun shone behind him, limning his dark hair in light as he gazed at her, seemingly stuck on that last thought.

Her heart skittered.

Who cared about Potter’s flakiness when she had Chat here, reliable and sure?

“You’re amazing, you know?” he said. “I don’t know if I ever said anything—and you made stuff pretty clear on your end, and it’s not really fair of me not to have…well.”

Lily’s mouth couldn’t form any words. Her brain had a few scattered here and there, but they were irrelevant, nonsensical ones, like lemon and curmudgeon.

He seemed to be heading a certain direction…but maybe he was being nice before he let her down gently…

“Anyway,” he said, and offered her the paper in his hand. “Here’s the analysis of the akuma attacks.”

Lily took the paper without looking away from his eyes. He hadn’t said one way or the other—which was fair, totally fair, it had barely been any time at all.

But still.

She let out a short, rushed breath and opened the paper.

Chat’s friend had added bright red dots to a street map of London, one for the starting point of each akuma attack. Dots covered all of central London, including both sides of the Thames, blanketing many of the better-known sights of the city.

Looking at them like this, she could remember every easy and hard-won fight. She’d actually forgotten about a few until she saw the corresponding dot. All of this in under a year…

She frowned. “There’s definitely a cluster, but it’s not very well defined, is it? More like a wide blob than anything.”
Chat nodded. “My friend tried to run some analysis to find a center point, but he said it didn’t really work. Something about variable radius, I dunno. Didn’t really follow.”

She let her hand fall to her side, the paper crinkling. “Well, shit.”

“Yeah. I thought this would be it, you know?”

“This is so frustrating. I don’t know how Dumbledore expects us to find Voldemort with nothing to go on.”

“He must have meant something else besides what we thought? Although I don’t know what we expected with this, now that it’s done. Did we really think it’d be a perfect circle with Voldemort’s house in the middle?”

“No,” Lily said slowly, looking down at the map again. “That wouldn’t make any sense at all, would it? Because people don’t spend all their time at their homes, do they?”

Chat snatched the map out of her hand to study it. “No. Most people spend a lot of time—”

“At work.”

“We’re idiots.”

“Huge idiots.”

She shifted to stand next to him, eyes scanning over the dots in search of a new pattern.

“What were we thinking?” Chat said. “That he’s some agoraphobe sitting at home all the time?”

“Like Voldemort is sitting alone in a room full of moths, hunched up in a corner with nothing to do but wait for negative emotions to pop up in range.”

Try as Lily might, she couldn’t visualize two neat centers in the collection of dots. Overall they definitely resembled two overlapping circles, much more than one long oval, but they spanned too large an area to guess at their exact middles.

“He has to get out of his house,” Chat said. “Being in a room full of moths all the time would be really annoying. They’d land on you all the time.”

“They’d get in your drinks.”

“Land on your face while you’re sleeping.”

“Completely unreasonable way to live, really. There’s no way he only launches attacks from home.”

While she and Potter had some back and forth every now and then, it had nothing on her and Chat. He knew her mind. He knew how it worked. And they had such bloody good chemistry—so who cared one whit about Potter?

She had to focus her efforts. The only thing lacking in her relationship with Chat was that they didn’t know much about each other’s personal lives. And that was easily remedied, wasn’t it?

Chat folded up the map in a small square and tucked it under his suit along his neck. “I’ll talk to my mate about redoing the map.”

“How did he take the news that you were Chat Noir?”
“Oh, he was dead impressed.”

“He was, was he?”

“Look at me—how could he not be?” Chat propped his fists on his hips and lifted his chin in a heroic pose. “I don’t know why you’re surprised someone’s impressed. Given, you know.”

Lily crossed her arms. “Don’t use that against me.”

“No, I didn’t—not against you,” he said, dropping his hands to his sides. “I just…sorry.”

“I liked it better when you told me I was amazing.”

“Oh, well, that’s something I can keep going on. I’m brilliant at compliments.”

“I thought we agreed that brilliant—” Her mouth snapped shut. Wrong boy, wrong boy, what was wrong with her? “Never mind.”

“Oh, you thought I was selling myself short? Agreed. I’m more than brilliant.”

“At complimenting yourself, definitely.”

“What can I say, I’ve got a lot to compliment. As do you, my lady. Would you care for some words about your eyes? Maybe your hair?”

Lily made a face. “This is going to sound really rude, but I actually don’t really like physical compliments.”

“Don’t tell me you think you’re nothing to look at—”

“No, not at all, I’m just…it’s not that important for me to hear that.”

She’d been praised for her looks all day. For years now, really, but those comments rang hollow. She hadn’t earned her looks. She hadn’t chosen them. They simply were.

“Right, then,” he said. “Um. You’re wicked strong, you know. And dead clever—I would never figure out how to use those Lucky Charm objects. And, maybe most importantly, you like me, which proves you have great taste.”

God, he was just so—Chat. Inelegant, a lot of the time, but genuine, and himself, and those weird, sweet words from him wrapped around her heart and squeezed.

Her face got very hot very quickly.

“Very nice and all,” she managed to say, “but you still managed to turn things back to you, didn’t you? You have some sort of complex or something? Narcissism ring any bells to you?”

“Narcissism?” Chat pressed a hand to his chest. “That’s nowhere on the Potter family value scale—”

What. What?

What.

Lily’s brain broke.
Chat’s eyes went wide. “Shit. Shit! I mean. Er—”

“Potter?”

“Ummmmmm,” he said. “No.”

Lily’s feet took her a step back, and then another. “Oh my god!”

Chat reached out to her. “No, wait, Ladybug—”

“All this time—you’ve been James bloody Potter—”

“You don’t have to say it like that—and you only met me a couple weeks ago—unless—”

“I’ve got to run!” Lily yelped. “My sister will kill me if I’m late again!”

He fell still, his hand stretched out toward her. “Lily?”

Fuck.

FUCK!

“Definitely not!” Lily flung her yo-yo at the chimney on a neighboring rooftop. “Nope! You have definitely got the wrong girl!”

“Oh my god!”

But his voice was already far away because Lily could flee quickly when she needed to. Having a magic yo-yo and a supersuit would do that for you.

Potter Potter Potter it had been James bloody Potter the whole time!

He knew who she was and she knew who he was and it wasn’t supposed to be like this! He was supposed to say he fancied her back and then they’d snog a bunch and then they’d beat Voldemort and then they’d reveal their true identities, and he would turn out to be someone she hadn’t met before.

But it was Potter.

It was Potter.

Lily dropped into a copse of trees in a nearby park to detransform.

“MaryitwasPOTTER!”

Mary hung in the air in front of her, smiling. “Oh, Lily, how wonderful!”

“No, it’s not wonderful, it’s—oh god, I don’t know. I don’t know!”

“You liked Chat, and you were starting to like James, so this is good, right?”

“You,” Lily said, brandishing a finger at her, “are not helping. This is not—it’s not bad, but it’s not good, I’m just—this is too much!”
“Take a second and breathe, all right? I think you’ll see that this is really perfect, that there’s no reason to work yourself up about this—”

Lily marched out of the trees onto a field before Mary could finish because fuck that, she did not need to be told to calm down. The boy she fancied had turned out to be Potter. That was worth flipping out about!

Mary caught up to her and sank into Lily’s bag before anyone could see her.

“Lily,” she whispered, “where are you going?”

Lily didn’t answer. She strode over toward the street, weaving through a field of kids playing football, and hailed a cab to the only other place she could think of going.

This was all so ludicrous. Because of course it had been Potter. They had the same brown skin and the same black hair and the same cocky grin and how the hell had she never noticed how much he looked like James bloody Potter?

It was too stupid to endure.

Dorcas’s mums let her in with a warm greeting, but Lily didn’t wait for them to fetch Dorcas. After a quick hello, she slipped past them, bolted up the narrow steps, and burst into Dorcas’s room unannounced.

“Dorcas,” she said, “I need you to be good at boy talk just this once.”

Dorcas set down her sketch pencil and pushed her chair away from her desk. “Lily,” she said. “Think about what you’re doing here. Look at your options, yeah?”

“What options?” Lily asked wildly. “I’m desperate and I can’t go talk to Potter—”

Dorcas stood up. “Potter?”

“—because it turns out I’ve—and he’s been in love with some other girl, and then another girl told him she fancied him—wait, that was me, wasn’t it? Oh my god he was coming around to me.”

“What the hell are you on about?”

“Potter—he’s liked someone for ages but I don’t know who, but I guess it doesn’t matter because he might be interested in me now. Oh god.”

“Lily Evans. For fuck’s sake.” Dorcas came over to grab Lily by the shoulders. “I have tried so hard not to get involved here. But for the love of god, I know who he fancies.”

“You do?”

“Yes. And I’ll give you a hint.”

“This is no time for games!”

“One, she goes to our school. Two, she has red hair.”

“Persephone Baddock? Ew.”

“Three, she’s standing in my room, and four—”
“Wait, what?”

“—she’s named Lily bloody Evans. Potter has fancied you since you came to Hogwarts, you complete dolt.”

Lily scoffed. “He has not.”

“All right, maybe since the third day of school. But since then. The boy is hardcore mad for you. Why do you think he’s such a fool whenever you’re around?”

A hundred tiny incidents fluttered through Lily’s head.

If he’d fancied Lily from the start—and now he was coming around to Ladybug—

“Oh shit,” Lily said.

“What?”

Lily broke out of her grasp to start pacing across the orange rug. “If Potter fancies Lily Evans—”

“You mean you.”

“—and he’s starting to fancy—and I’ve fancied—and now I’m starting to fancy—oh my god. Oh my god.”

“Lily. What the fuck are you talking about?”

Lily stopped abruptly and spun back to Dorcas. “You’re sure?”

“That you’ve had a brain injury? Yeah.”

“That Potter fancies me.”

“Christ, yes. Everyone knows it. And I mean literally every one of our classmates except you. Even the bloody teachers know.”

“This is too ridiculous!” Lily rubbed her hands over her face, make-up be damned. “This is too—stupid! I can’t even think about how idiotic this is!”

“You wanted to do boy talk but I don’t follow you at all. So don’t blame me for being useless at it.”

Lily looked at the door. “I’ve got to go.”

“What?”

“I’ve got to go—my alarm hasn’t gone off yet, I’m still in the window of blaming the Tube before Petunia murders me—”

“You can’t start all this and leave me in the dark. I’ve been waiting for you to piece it together for months, and now you’re running out as soon as I finally give in and tell you?”

“You’ve been a tremendous help. I think. Oh god, I don’t know anything right now, but I think—thanks.”

Lily ran out the door and into the corridor.

“Lily,” Dorcas called out. “Where are you going?”
Lily was in another cab in no time, even though like the ride before, it wouldn’t take more than a few minutes.

The fact was, there was only one person who could appreciate what she was going through right now. Mary just wanted to see the good in it and move on. Dorcas couldn’t appreciate the insanity without knowing that Lily was Ladybug, and that Potter—

How was he Chat Noir?

It made so much sense. It made the most perfect sense in the world and she’d missed it entirely.

Euphemia beamed when Lily entered the shop. “Back again, eh?”

Lily walked right past her and poked her head into a back room.

Euphemia chased after her. “Lily, where are you—”

Lily pointed to the staircase she’d found. “He’s up this way, yeah?”

“Lily—”

“Good,” Lily said, and started stomping up toward Potter’s room.

James stood petrified on the roof as Ladybug flew away.

As Lily Evans flew away.

This was unbelievable. This was incredible. This was—this was perfect, theoretically.

But it didn’t feel like perfect, it felt like cold waves of utter and complete panic crashing over him, extinguishing every other thought he had.

This was too complicated by far. He needed perspective.

He raced home, detransforming along the way, and flung himself into the bakery.

“Mum!” he cried. “Mum, it’s Lily, she’s—”

But of course he couldn’t say.

“She stopped by while you were out.” Euphemia lifted an eyebrow. “She apologized for yesterday, said there was some sort of family emergency.”

“Family emergency—oh. Oh.” A borderline-mad laugh bubbled out of James, slow at first and then picking up speed. Because of course Lily Evans had stood him up last night. And it wasn’t because she didn’t want to come over, it was because—

“This is too much,” he wheezed between laughs. “Oh my god. How did we not—how could this have lasted eight months—”

Euphemia came around the counter to place a steadying hand on James’s shoulder.

“Dear, if you’re high, go up to your room to be safe about it. I’ll bring you some treats.”

“No, no, this is just—she fancies me!”
“Yes, that was quite obvious.”

“Yeah, but you don’t—shit. Shit! I need Sirius.”

James brushed past Euphemia and fled upstairs to fetch his phone. He opened up his text conversation with Sirius and finished writing LILY EVANS IS LADY before he stopped. Then he threw his phone down on his bed, where it bounced once, and then twice.

“Fuck.”

Algernon poked his head out of James’s shirt pocket.

“I can’t tell anyone who Ladybug is,” James said to him, “can I?”

“No,” said Algernon, and ducked back down.

James stared at his pocket.

“Oh god,” he said. “Am I having a drug trip? Did I forget that I took something? Did my mum slip them to me? She’s a shady character, you know. Having heaps of money and connections does funny things to people.”

Algernon popped out again only long enough to say: “No.”

James flopped backwards onto his bed, laughing desperately. “This is so—so—mad. And I’ve got no one to talk to about it except a cat I thought didn’t talk but who now only says no.”

He reached for his phone again to shoot off a quick message to Pete about redoing the map, then let it fall back onto the bed.

Lily was Ladybug. Ladybug was Lily.

He was Chat Noir and she was Ladybug and he had been fighting villains with Lily Evans for the better part of a year.

How was this reality? How was he so—so—lucky?

The trapdoor leading up to his room burst open.

He couldn’t decide if his luck had continued or run out because Lily Evans nearly flew up through the hole.

“James Potter,” she said, advancing on him.

He scrambled to his feet. “Er, hi.”

His heart kept hurling itself against his ribcage, trying to escape him and this insane situation. Lily Evans was here. Lily Evans was in his room.

Her glorious form stood in front of him with her hands on her hips. “Do you fancy me?”

He blinked. “All right, not the opener I was expecting.”

“Well it is the opener. So?”

“Ah…” His eyes drifted left to the largest poster of her, this one from an ad campaign with a jeans
company. His tongue shouldn’t have fought him so hard on this. There was an obvious answer and only one answer and why couldn’t he just say it? “I mean…”

Lily followed his line of sight.

“Oh,” she said, two patches of red appearing on her cheeks as she took in the myriad photos of her taped up on the wall. “Oh, that’s—I see.”

“Yeah, so…that’s where I’m at? And you’re, er…you like…I mean…I mean ohmygod, you kissed me!”

Her face whipped back toward him. “I kissed Chat Noir!”

“You kissed me. You, Lily Evans, kissed me, James Potter.”

“Apparently!”

James pressed his hands to his temples. “What the fuck!”

“And you, Chat Noir, kissed Ladybug on the cheek!”

“You and I! We’ve kissed!”

“I know!”

What the fuck what the fuck what the fuck this had all sorts of layers of nonsense to it, and they kept peeling apart to reveal even more, like terrible fucking onions. The only layers James wanted were cake ones, not unexpectedly intricate layers about kissing!

“Oh god,” she said, pointing a finger at him. “You let me go on about Chat to you downstairs!”

“Well yeah! What the hell else was I supposed to do, turn you away and say who I was?”

“No, but you should have—I mean—that was really low of you, letting me ramble on like that—”

“But you needed someone to talk to and I couldn’t let you keep being so stressed out and I didn’t know what to do and I panicked, okay? And I told you stuff back, didn’t I? I wasn’t lying when I was talking about, er, you. Oh god, I was talking about Lily to you.”

They’d commiserated over unrequited love together.

They’d confided in each other.

They’d fucking kissed.

Lily passed a hand over her face. “How,” she asked,” did we go eight bloody months without figuring this out?”

“Like I knew the magic hid our identities, but Christ.”

“I didn’t think it would work on each other!”

“Well obviously it did because I totally would have fucking noticed it was you!”

“We’re bloody superheroes—we’ve stopped every villain Voldemort has thrown at us, and we couldn’t crack this one—”
James’s stomach dropped. “I can never tell Sirius,” he said. “I’ll never live this down.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, god, your mates. They know you’re Chat, don’t they? That’s Peter who made the map.”

“Sirius found out on accident, all right? And then I had to tell Peter for the map stuff, and then I figured I might as well tell Remus, but he already knew—”

“He knew you were Chat?”

“Yes, the bloody tosser.”

“But you didn’t know I was—and I didn’t know you were—how did he—”

“He’s obviously a fucking wizard. I dunno.”

She took a deep breath while rubbing her palms over her eyes, looking simultaneously stunned and stunning.

The image in front of him was still beyond comprehension: Lily Evans, in the flesh in his room, standing on a floor he’d paced over countless times thinking about the shape of her damn smile. Lily Evans, who had been his partner in figurative but certainly not literal crime for eight bloody months.

Lily Evans, who had been flirting shamelessly with him and he’d been too obsessed with her to even fucking notice.

“Shit,” she said, her fingers sliding up into her hair. “We’re at the best college in the country, and we couldn’t…and you…and me…” She glanced at the wall of photos again, hands dropping to her sides. “You really… All this time, it’s been…”

“Er,” he said, and cleared his throat. “Yeah. And, uh, same.”

Her jeans started making a series of chirping and clacking sounds.

“Are those supposed to do that?” he asked. “If not, you should ask for a refund.”

She swore and tugged her phone out of her back pocket. “My alarm—I’m actually going to be murdered tonight, so good luck finding Voldemort on your own, yeah?”

“You set an alarm for your own demise?”

“I was supposed to be home an hour ago.” She shoved the phone into the small, grey bag hanging over her shoulder. “I’ve got to go,” she said, crossing back to the trapdoor.

“Er,” said James. He took a couple steps to follow her, one hand rubbing the back of his head. “Right then.”

Lily hurried down two rungs, then hesitated and looked back up at him.

“This is—this is really bloody weird, right?”

It was Lily saying it, but it was also Ladybug. Flipping Ladybug. His eyes still refused to fully process the image—or maybe that was the magic—and his brain could not make the two girls align.

“Absolutely,” he said. “Dead weird.”

James’s eyes lingered where she’d disappeared from sight. Her footsteps ran across the living room, then thudded down the stairs.

Lily Evans had just been in his room.

*Ladybug* had just been in his room.

She’d been here, and she’d found out about his horribly embarrassing wall of photos, and she’d admitted that they’d kissed.

They had *fucking kissed*.

He’d been kissed by Lily fucking Evans.

He strained his ears to make sure he couldn’t hear her anymore, and flipped the trapdoor shut with his foot.

Then he threw his fists into the air. “She fancies me!”

“Shut up,” said Algernon.

“Never!”

Algernon grumbled but said nothing more, not even when James prodded him.

“She bloody *fancies* me. She went on and on about me—all those things Ladybug said were *her*. Lily Evans thinks I’m fit as fuck!”

He ran over to his window to see if he could spot her out on the street, but she was already gone.

“She thinks I hung the fucking moon. Or that Chat did, anyway.” He paused. Then he stepped back from the window. “I mean, she liked Chat. Even though she didn’t know him that well.”

He turned back to the room, mouth slanted.

He’d thought about telling Lily he was Chat so many times. And now he had, unintentionally. And she…she had apparently already fancied Chat. Wonderfully. Hilariously.

Bizarrely. Because James had been right there the whole time. Being his same self, albeit with fewer puns.

Lily knew James better than she knew Chat, didn’t she? She’d fallen for Chat immediately, she’d said as much herself. But she hadn’t…in the eight months, it seemed she’d never…

He swallowed.

“Algernon,” he said. “What d’you think the chances are she’s going to fancy Chat now that she knows who he is?”

But Algernon, of course, said nothing.

Lily felt like she was buzzing the entire Tube ride home. She didn’t take one of the free seats, instead clinging to a germ-infested pole, while reading every single word on the Tube ads, and then
examining the outfit of every person within view, and then trying and failing to count the number of stops on the Tube map. She kept losing count after fifty.

She should have run home instead. That would’ve cleared her mind. That would have given her anything to focus on other than the quagmire she’d found herself it.

It really shouldn’t have been a quagmire. Logically, it seemed so simple. Chat and James were the same person. What was there to be upset about?

Despite her attempts at distraction, her mind persistently slipped her examples of when she should have known. Quietly reminded her about the blatant similarities between them. And then, as usual, offered her a series of memorable moments when Chat’s wit or physique had sent her heart skittering.

Potter’s wit. Potter’s physique.

Fuck, this would take getting used to.

She’d come no further in reconciling the two when she discovered that her feet had led her to the front door. Time for the inevitable. Although what did it matter, really? There wasn’t much more Petunia could do—she’d already grounded Lily and promised to steal her away to Sussex. This couldn’t be that bad.

She took a deep breath, whispered, “Wish me luck,” to Mary, and tried to slip inside unnoticed.

But Petunia was waiting. Petunia had nothing to do but endlessly clean the kitchen counters and bake overdone cakes and wait around to control her sister’s life.

There was shouting, of course, and then the somewhat expected confiscation of her phone. The laptop she hadn’t seen coming.

“I need that for schoolwork!” Lily said.

“You should have thought of that before,” Petunia said.

“That doesn’t even make any sense!”

The shouting match ended, as always, with Lily storming up the stairs to her room. But after she threw open the attic door, she fell still.

Someone had been in her room. Her chair had been moved, the window had been closed, and it smelled faintly like—

Sawdust.

A set of shiny new screw heads taunted her from the base of her window. Vernon, no doubt using one of his fucking work-provided tools, had drilled screws through the of the frame, straight down into the windowsill.

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck.

She thundered back downstairs, her footsteps falling hard enough to shake the picture frames hanging on the wall.

Petunia was, as always, waiting for her in the kitchen.
“Now you’re taking away my right to fresh air?” Lily demanded.

“How do you think I felt,” Petunia said, “every time I came to ask for your help and only found an empty room? I’m not as stupid as you think I am.”

Lily’s veins flooded with ice. If Remus had figured out Potter—who was to say her sister wouldn’t have done the same—

“Petunia—”

Petunia placed her hands on the kitchen table and pushed herself up from her seat. “You’re always sneaking off, probably to some common boy or that awful girl with the disgusting dreadlocks—”

The ice should have disappeared—Lily’s secret was safe—but it had already taken hold. Its crystals spread out to blanket her heart and hardened in an instant.

“—and I won’t stand for it, Lily.”

“And I,” Lily said, feeling an eerie sense of calm, “won’t stand for this. I refuse to live in this house anymore.”

“You’ve nowhere else to go.”

That had been true once. It had been true for a long time. But it was not true anymore.

“I’m going to live with Dorcas,” she said. “Or anyone else. I don’t care. I have friends.”

“I am your legal guardian and I absolutely forbid it.”

Lily gave a hollow laugh. “What are you going to do about it, ring the police? Are you really going to bring down that sort of shame on yourself?”

Petunia stood there with her eyes narrowed as she said, “And what would your employers have to say about that sort of headline?”

The ground fell away beneath Lily’s yellow flats, like stepping onto the hole of the trapdoor in her room—

“You wouldn’t,” Lily said. “You wouldn’t. You can’t bear it when Mrs. Cole next door so much as mentions that Vernon’s been coming home awfully late—”

“Do not test me, Lily Catherine Evans.”

“Don’t talk to me like that—you’re not my mum—”

The words flew out of her mouth unchecked and across the room, where they landed squarely on Petunia, her shoulders twitching with the weight of them.

“No,” Petunia said tightly. “I’m not.” She lifted her nose in the air and angled her head sideways, her familiar face in profile to Lily. “I won’t let that freak Voldemort take you away from me.”

This wasn’t possible. Lily couldn’t have just been outmaneuvered by Petunia, of all people.

There had to be a way around. There had to be a path forward. But try as Lily might, every option her mind developed ran straight into the same roadblocks. No path led to what she wanted, no path let her keep her school and her friends and her Miraculous.
How had her life fallen apart so quickly? Worse, how had it happened again?

It was so cliché, and so predictable, but Lily couldn’t stop the words from tumbling out of her mouth: “I hate you.”

Petunia said, “I’m pregnant.” And then, “Ten weeks.”

“I don’t care,” Lily said, and spun around on her heel.

She would care, later. She’d been down this particular road before. But it was irrelevant information for now, a tiny lit match compared to the burning inferno of her life. Even the fact that Petunia had never got past seven weeks before didn’t help—there would be no celebrating, not right now.

After another noisy trip up the stairs, Lily dove under her covers, letting Mary snuggle up against her cheek while her fury cooled into despair.

She lay there for some time, the image of Petunia’s face still lingering in her mind as she’d threatened Lily’s life. Petunia’s neck was longer, and her hair was blonde, but the shape of her nose matched Lily’s exactly.

Whatever physical similarities there were, Lily could find almost none in their true selves. There simply wasn’t an ounce of compassion in Petunia. She seemed to have none of the swings of anger and justice and joy that Lily did. Her life seemed to be nothing but a state of constant anxiety over being better than someone else.

And now Lily was trapped with her. Literally trapped, unable to save the city without sacrificing her education and her job, stuck with her petty, malicious sister for every hour she wasn’t working or at school.

“Mary,” Lily finally whispered, her throat aching. “Mary, I can’t do this.”

“You can, Lily. You’ll get through it.”

“I can’t be Ladybug if we move. I can’t be Ladybug if I’m trapped in my room. I can’t—”

Mary’s tiny hand stroked over Lily’s cheek, sliding through the few tears that had spilled over.

“You were chosen because you’re miraculous, Lily Evans,” she said. “You’ve been so strong and so good and it’s almost over.”

“Not if I can’t go fight akumas. Not if I’m stuck here instead of out looking for Voldemort.” Lily pressed her face briefly into the pillow. “I can’t go to Dorcas’s. Petunia will definitely ring the police—she won’t care about these neighbors, not when we’re moving so soon.”

“I know it doesn’t help, but remember that she’s trying to protect you—”

“No. It doesn’t help.”

Lily pulled her duvet tighter around them, tucking the top under her head. They were safe and protected here in this warm, dimly lit, makeshift cave. Here there were no dead parents and no bitchy sisters and no silly villains.

“It’s okay to be upset,” said Mary. “This is a very upsetting situation.”

“Oh, wonderful, I’m so glad to have your permission.”
“Lily.”

“Urgh, I’m sorry, I’m just—”

“I know.”

She wasn’t okay. She wasn’t going to be okay until something gave, until they beat Voldemort, until she found a way through this.

But at least she wasn’t alone right now. She’d have Mary until end of term.

“If nothing else,” Mary said, “the Chat Noir situation turned out really well.”

“Some superhero I’m going to be, sitting on my arse in my room while he tries to fight villains single-handed. He’ll probably be glad to get another girl as Ladybug.”

Mary poked Lily’s cheek with her tiny finger. “He fancies you. He’s fancied you for months.”

It shouldn’t have worked. It shouldn’t have stacked up at all against everything else awful going on in her life.

The corners of Lily’s lips twitched all the same.

“He didn’t even know I was Ladybug,” she said.

“He liked you for you.”

“He liked—he likes me. But he’s Potter. But he’s…oh, Mary.” Lily reached up to stroke a finger over Mary’s hairless head. “I just don’t see how this can all work out. It’s too much.”

“You’ve got this, Lily. I have faith in you and so does Chat. He’ll be there for you.”

Lily made a noncommittal noise. Her thing with Potter was too new. Too fresh. She’d only just worked up the courage to try to rely on Dorcas for shelter, and they’d been friends for six months.

“We’ll see,” Lily said, and rolled onto her back. “God, I hope Peter finishes that map soon…”

The trapdoor flew open again almost as soon as Lily had left.

Euphemia’s head popped through, grinning like a lunatic. “So?”

James flailed, then put his hands on his hips, but that felt weird, so he let them dangle awkwardly instead.

“So—so she, er…” He was not prepared to answer this very reasonable inquiry. He settled on: “She was here.”

“I did rather notice, unless that was a ghost I saw earlier, in which case I’m sorry for your loss.” Euphemia climbed the rest of the way through the door and dusted her hands. “Soooo, are you dating?”

“Mum! That’s so—we just—no, it’s, er…complicated.”

“Young people these days think everything is so much more complicated. What’s complicated about you fancy her, she fancies you, now snog? There’s nothing modern about that. Trust me.”
“No, really, you don’t understand.”

“Don’t be so cliché. I expect a better response from my brilliant son.”

“But you don’t, it’s—” He dropped down onto the edge of his bed, subtly tucking Algernon’s bowl slightly further underneath with his heel. “I can’t explain.”

She sat down next to him and took his hand, entwining their fingers together and squeezing. Her hand was so pale next to his.

“Is she going to ring you later?” she asked.

“First of all, we are definitely not at that stage. Snapgramming, maybe. Possibly some light texting. Second of all, she doesn’t have my number—”

“I gave it to her.”

“What the fuck.”

Of course his bloody mum had given Lily his number. Because he was in a comedy, apparently. The kind of comedy where his crush had been flirting with him for almost a year and he didn’t even know it. He didn’t have Lily’s number, but he knew exactly how it felt to have her on his back with her arms around his neck as they raced over Millennium Bridge. He knew what it was like to have her hand latch onto his and pull him neatly into the air as they swung out of the path of a monster. He even knew how soft her arse and her breasts were. Not that he had ever appreciated that.

His mum rapped the back of his hand with her knuckles. “You’re taking too long with her. I’m bored.”

James scrambled to pick up his phone—what if she’d texted and he’d somehow missed it—But nothing. Just some updates to the group chat with his mates.

“I can’t believe you gave her my number,” he said. “What if she texts?”

“You answer. Wittily, one hopes.” Euphemia paused. “Did you at least kiss her?”

“Mum!”

“I take that as a no. You’re not nearly embarrassed enough. I’d also like to register my disappointment that I have to resort to reading your facial expressions, instead of you simply telling me.”

She tried to play it off lightly, but he could read her, too. This minor but expanding rift between them hadn’t been planned, or wanted. It wasn’t bloody fair. He needed his mum for stuff like this.

He had responsibilities, though, and not just to himself anymore. He couldn’t tell her that he had apparently already been in love with Ladybug, that things seemed like they should work out from here but he wasn’t entirely sure, that he was terrified about how Lily would take the news of his identity. He couldn’t talk to his mum about this, or to Sirius, or to anyone.

Except Algernon, who apparently could talk, but only to annoy James.

James was on his own for this one. And he was definitely not equipped to handle that.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Really.”
She lifted her chin and harrumphed. “Very well. I at least insist you tell me what happened to that other girl.”

“Oh, er. It’s Lily. I mean, she’s not Lily, obviously, that’s ridiculous! I mean, um, I’ve got to go with Lily. It just…makes sense.”

Lying to his mum when it wasn’t about shenanigans or superheroing wrenched at his stomach.

“I suppose. So long as it’s decided.” She paused. “And so long as there is kissing. Eventually. Then I shall be content.”

He would pay for it later, but he took the opportunity to promptly push his mum off his bed. He could have sworn he heard a faint snickering from Algernon.

When Sirius showed up later that afternoon, he found James frantically taking down all his posters and pictures of Lily.

Even staring at the pictures now, even knowing intellectually that that was the face of Ladybug, James’s brain still could not reconcile the two.

Sirius stood looming over James. “I’d ask if you’d given up on Evans,” he said, taking in the scene, “but as it happens, I don’t care.”

“Some mate you are.” James hurriedly rolled up another poster. “I am in a panic and you couldn’t care less.”

“I only don’t care if it’s a panic over Evans. Or Ladybug. Or any girl, really.”

“Please, you know exactly what the panic’s about. Don’t pretend my mum didn’t tell you Lily was here.” James found himself giving a manic laugh. “But it’s just as well you don’t care ’cause I can’t tell you about it anyway.”

Sirius’s eyes narrowed. “What d’you mean, you can’t tell me?”

“Does it matter? You don’t care.”

“I don’t care.”

“Yes, you said.”

“But why wouldn’t you be able to tell me?”

James’s hands tore at his hair. “Because. Because the universe is—is mad. And a little brilliant, but mostly mad, and I can’t—”

“You’re not planning to tell Remus this thing but not me, are you?”

“No, I can’t tell anyone and I’m literally dying.”

“Potter.” Sirius stooped down into a squat, his elbows on his knees. “Don’t you dare hold out on me.”

“I thought you didn’t care.”

“I don’t. Really can’t stress that enough. But you’re being too fucking weird to leave alone.” Sirius held up a hand. “I can’t believe I’m about to ask this…but what the hell happened with Evans?”
James groaned. “I can’t tell you!”

Sirius sent him a look worthy of Algernon. “Evans ran in here. After she stood you up yesterday. If she didn’t fancy you, she wouldn’t have come barging in like that.”

“Don’t just parrot my mum.”

Sirius’s cheeks went slightly pink as he sat down on the ground, legs stretched out in front of him. “All right, so she told me that part. But obviously nothing bad happened or you’d be sulking up a storm.”

“That’s true,” James said wistfully.

“But if it was something good, there’s no reason you wouldn’t tell me...unless you just wanted me to care and have now tricked me into it.”

“Oh, that would’ve been dead clever, wouldn’t it?”

“Too clever for you. I take it back.”

“My heart, it’s wounded.”

Sirius brushed his fingers through his ever-luxurious hair. “So Evans definitely fancies you, and so does Ladybug, and you’re stuck between them...but no, that’s not right either, is it? Because then you’d want to go on about choosing and I would hate it.”

“Mind reader, you are.”

“And you were supposed to meet up with Ladybug earlier...what happened with her, if you can’t tell me what happened with Evans?”

“I can’t tell you! Not because I don’t want to, but because she—” James picked up a few photos of Lily without any real reason to, other than to give his anxious hands something to do. This line of conversation was getting dangerous. “Look, I’ll say it’s good, what happened with Ladybug...I think. I’m pretty sure. Very sure. I just—wow, I mean, it’s so...anyway.”

“And things went well with Evans,” Sirius said suspiciously.

“Sort of. I mean...bit weird at the end and she had to go before we could, ah. But yeah...well-ish. Considering.”

“So by some absolute miracle,” Sirius said, “you actually have two girls who are interested in you. Two ginger girls with green eyes because you have a very specific type, apparently. And the reason you’re not a complete wreck anymore about choosing between them is...” His face went blank. “No.”

“Sirius,” James warned, scrambling to his feet.

“She’s not,” Sirius said, as though trying to convince himself. “She isn’t.”

“I said nothing!”

“No bloody way.”

“I don’t know what you’re thinking but it’s definitely not true!”
“That’s too unbelievable.”

“So unbelievable it’s not true! Ha. Ha ha ha.”

“But how did you—you weren’t going to until after Voldemort—”

James made a show of picking up his Lily posters, letting out a string of silent curses in his head. He’d known her identity for two bloody hours and he’d already gone and outed her!

“No idea what you’re talking about!” he said. “Not the foggiest, going to go back to my work now.”

He made it to his bed with the posters before Sirius said, “You didn’t mean to, did you?”

“Make you feel like an idiot by getting you to assume things?” James tossed the posters under his bed, careful not to knock them into Algernon’s bowl. “Nope.”

“You fucking idiot.”

“I mean, even if I knew what you were talking about, and even if it were true, you assume I did something, and not her—”

“James.”

James sank down onto his bed, scrubbing at his hair with one hand. “I didn’t mean to, all right? It slipped out and then she, er, did the same, and, ah...”

Sirius got to his feet. He brushed imaginary dust off of his black jeans. He looked at James, and then at the pile of magazine pictures on the floor, and then at the ceiling.

James braced himself.

“This,” Sirius said, “is the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“That’s what we said!”

“Christ. What a disaster.”

“No! No, see, it’s going to work out, yeah? Because she fancies me, and I fancy her, and if she can just get over this weirdness—”

“You almost got her pulled out of school.”

“I’m sure she’s mostly forgotten about that by now! And like—yeah, she called me an arrogant toerag in front of the whole class, but she’s not...I mean, lately...” James swallowed. “Do you think she’s upset it’s me?”

Sirius gave him a flat look.

James flopped backwards onto his bed, arms spread wide. “I’m ruined.”

Sirius said, “I regret asking all of this. Pretend I was never here.”

James launched to his feet and ran over to grab hold of Sirius’s arm. “You can’t leave! I thought I would be miserable and alone with my weird cat—who can talk, incidentally, we’ll get to that later—but you know.”
Even though Sirius knew perfectly well that James’s muscles could pin him, he still tried to shrug out of James’s hands. Naturally, he failed.

“Right,” James said, pulling Sirius back over to his bed. “Let’s start at the beginning. Day one of school—I get my Miraculous, and she must have too, right?”

Sirius pressed his eyes closed and said, “Oh god help.”

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Snape rapped his fist against Riddle’s door three times in rapid succession. “My lord, if you have a moment. It’s urgent.”

There was a moment’s pause, and then: “Enter.”

Snape slipped inside and shut the door behind him. He gave a curt bow and approached Riddle’s desk, holding a manila folder tightly in one hand.

Riddle looked up from the paper he’d been writing on. “I do hope you offer more interesting news than these insipid interview questions. Although I suppose I can’t entirely mourn the loss of proper journalism, they are setting the bar tremendously low these days.” He set down his fountain pen. “They’ve deigned to ask me my pants preference.”

Snape choked. “My lord—”

“Spare me the diatribe. I’ve run it myself in my head. Rest assured, all will receive justice in due time.” He gestured for Snape to hand him the folder. “I assume this is for my perusal.”

“Of course, my lord.” Snape straightened, but did not hand over the folder. “There is a small matter before I reveal the success of the latest drone efforts—”

Riddle’s eyes lit up. “Success?”

“Yes, I—my lord.” He took a halting step forward. “Your suspicions were, of course, thoroughly sound, only…”

“Don’t tell me this is about the Evans girl.”

“My lord, it’s only—she and I…”

“She repudiated you. She humiliated you.”

“Yes, my lord, but I…I might ask…”

“You dare to ask for more? After all that I have provided for you?”

Snape cringed. “My lord, I would never presume to direct your actions, but with Lily…”

Riddle’s lip curled, ever so slightly. “I suppose,” he said, “that you’ll want her alive, at the end of things.”

“Yes,” Snape said tightly. “Please.”

Riddle beckoned for the folder again. “I make no guarantees about her safety. You understand. But as a reward for your loyal service, I will attempt to spare her.” And then, “I cannot spare both, you realize.”
Snape placed the folder in his hands. “There are no objections from me, my lord.”

“As I thought.”

Riddle flipped open the folder. He paged through the photographs within. He sat back in his seat.

And he smiled.
With no connection to the internet or to her friends, Lily counted down every excruciating minute left of her weekend. Schoolwork was, for once, her savior; it kept her from spending all her time thinking about Potter and Chat and the sinking ship of her life. Or at least it made a valiant attempt at trying.

She finished her maths homework with no issue and managed to hand-write most of her English essay. Some part of her assumed Petunia would return her laptop soon enough, once she calmed down and realized how desperately Lily needed it for very pragmatic reasons. The remaining part of her was frantically trying to brainstorm alternatives for how to access a word processor before her essay was due.

This, too, proved an excellent distraction.

She woke up extra early on Monday and raced out the door, without breakfast or so much as a word to Petunia. She rushed down the block, away from that godforsaken house, before slowing to a halt on the corner.

There, for a moment, she stood with her face lifted to the sky, soaking in the hazy pink clouds overhead and the muted sounds of the city waking up and the less-than-fresh air of a major world capital.

Even she realized how pathetic that last one was.

Hogwarts was quiet when she entered. Only a few other students sleepwalked through the corridors as Lily found her way to McGonagall’s office. Any joy at seeing the outside world slithered away as she was forced to confront the realities of her life.

“Would it be all right,” Lily asked, perched on the edge of a chair in McGonagall’s office, “if I turned in a hand-written essay tomorrow?”

McGonagall regarded her curiously over her tea. “The school requires electronic submission to allow the anti-plagiarism system to work,” she said. “Although I somehow doubt that’s what’s behind your request.”

“No, it’s—my laptop broke. Over the weekend. So I can’t type it up.”

“I realize your generation is used to personal devices, but I might remind you that the school and city libraries are available to you.”

“Yes, but—”

There was no believable lie here. The library would be the obvious option, if only Lily were able to access one.

McGonagall arched an eyebrow, waiting for Lily to continue.

“I…can’t,” Lily finished pathetically. “It’s, er. Not an option.”

McGonagall said: “I see.”

Lily looked down at her lap, where her fingers had twisted up together. This humiliating experience
was brought to her by her own damned sister. Her fingers curled in further.

“‘You’ve no way,’” McGonagall said, “‘to access a computer before the deadline?’”

“No,” Lily said. “I…no.”

Her stomach folded over on itself. She might’ve felt sick if she’d bothered to eat anything.

McGonagall sipped her tea without taking her eyes off Lily. “Very well.” She pushed her teacup and saucer aside. “I expect your handwritten essay prior to the beginning of school.”

Lily exhaled. “Thank you, Ms. McGonagall. I really appreciate it.”

McGonagall was a goddess among women. Turning it in early would save Lily the embarrassment of handing in a handwritten essay with everyone else’s typed versions.

McGonagall clasped her hands together on her desk. “As an educator,” she said, “I’m obligated to ask…is everything all right?”

A short, desperate laugh burst out of Lily before she could catch it.

She slapped a hand over her mouth. “I mean, sorry,” she said, bringing her hand down. “I’m, er. Yes. It’s all fine.”

McGonagall peered at her over her spectacles. “And you would alert me if the situation ever became…not fine.”

“Oh yes, absolutely.” Lily rose from the chair, smoothing her skirt with one hand. If only she could smooth out her heartbeat so easily. “Thanks again.”

She grabbed her bag and headed for the corner where she and Dorcas typically met. It was still early, but Dorcas was waiting there with her arms folded, and her mouth slanted.

Despite everything, Lily’s heart caught. She had a friend. A peeved friend, but a friend nonetheless.

She launched forward, throwing her arms around Dorcas’s waist and engulfing her in a hug. She’d have gone over the shoulders but Dorcas was freakishly tall.

“I’m sorry,” Lily said into Dorcas’s crisp white shirt.

“I was upset,” Dorcas said, “and now you’re making me less upset. It’s not fair.”

Lily pulled away. “Have I told you much I appreciate your directness?”

“You burst into my room. Ramble on about Potter. Leave. And then don’t answer my texts all weekend.”

“Petunia took my phone.”

Dorcas sent her a stone-like stare. “She did what?”

Lily caught her up on the Petunia-related pieces of her miserable weekend.

Dorcas’s jaw clenched. “Death it is, then,” she said. “For her, I mean. Not you.”

Lily let her weight collapse back against the wall, the wainscoting pressing into her hips. “It’s a near
thing for me, though. I’m fucked.”

Dorcas’s lips pressed together into a thin line. She tapped her foot twice, then said, “It violates my telling you what to do rule, but you need to move in with me.”

Lily promptly subjected Dorcas to another bone-crushing hug, letting this one linger. Dorcas was warm and solid and did not push Lily away.

It would’ve wrenched at her pride, but Lily would have asked to move in—to know she wouldn’t have had to beg, to have been offered what she needed so freely…

After they parted again, Lily said, “I want to, but I can’t because she’ll ring the police—”

“She wouldn’t.”

“She would, and then I’d lose my contracts—”

“They’d never fire you over that. Running away from home? Please. It’s the coke addicts and shoplifters that lose their contracts. And usually not even then.”

“I can’t risk it. A runaway isn’t exactly the image these companies want, yeah? People are supposed to think I’m fit when they see me, not be worried about my home life.”

Dorcas swore then, loudly and profusely, which was exactly what Lily would have liked to do just then.

She debated doing it anyway—her reputation wouldn’t matter once she was forcibly dragged to Sussex—but that would have been admitting defeat.

The good news was that Petunia’s draconian measures had the effect of distracting Dorcas from any talk of Potter. They spent the remainder of their limited time before class trying, and failing, to find a way forward for Lily.

But of course, two minutes before chemistry, Potter and his mates appeared down the corridor. Potter was laughing, head tilted back, brown throat bared. As his chin dipped back down, he caught sight of Lily.

He stopped in his tracks.

Peter ran smack into him, but Potter didn’t seem to notice.

Dorcas followed Lily’s line of sight. “Oh right.”

“Um,” said Lily.

Her heartbeat had only just started calming down from dealing with her other problems, but now it returned to its previous breakneck speed.

“What the hell happened with him?” Dorcas asked.

“We—er—it’s complicated?”

“Lily Evans—”

Lily clutched Dorcas’s arm. “Oh god, is he coming over here? What if he is, what do I say—”
Potter seemed to be in deep, frantic conversation with his own mates.

“D’you fancy him?” Dorcas asked.

“Oh, er, yeah, s’pose so.” Lily didn’t take her eyes off Potter. Students were flowing around him and his mates now, a river undeterred by an obstinate, very tall clump of rocks. “I can’t imagine why he wouldn’t come over—unless it’s too weird—he seemed okay but it’s been two days—”

Dorcas brushed Lily’s hand off. “What did the two of you do?”

“Look at that,” Lily said, glancing at her empty wrist. “Have to run to class, bye!”

“Lily!”

It wasn’t fair to leave Dorcas hanging like this, but Lily still hadn’t made up her mind about how to talk to her about the Potter stuff. Hell, she hadn’t even made up her mind over how to talk to herself about it.

She also hadn’t decided how to explain to Potter why they needed to catch Voldemort even sooner than planned. If they wanted to have as much time as possible to plot, she had to tell Potter straight away that the deadline had changed. The trouble was, of course, there was no good way to lay out why she couldn’t leave her room at night without diving headfirst into the clusterfuck of her relationship with Petunia.

She took the long route to the lab to avoid Potter. Rather than head for her usual table with Dorcas, she slid into place next to Lucinda Zheng.

“Mind if I sit here?” Lily asked. “Thanks.”

“Bonnie sits there—”

“Yeah, I know, but just for today. I’m asking as a friend. I need some, er, space.”

She very deliberately didn’t watch Potter walk into the lab. Or at least, she only watched out of the corner of her eye. Just to see if he was looking at her.

But then her eyes strayed too far, and he noticed. He looked back at her, offering a tentative smile.

Chat was smiling at her.

“Ooooh,” said Lucinda.

“Hm?” Lily turned away from Potter, her overheated face a potential new source for thermal energy.

“Now I understand.”

“You understand…what?”

Lucinda looked at her knowingly. “I understand.”

Oh, god, everyone did know Potter fancied her. What fresh hell was this?

“There’s nothing to understand,” Lily said quickly. “Nothing at all.”

“Mhmm. You two just slip out of class. At the same time. All the time. What’s a girl like me supposed to believe you’re up to, if not…”
If the world were kind, a rift would have opened up beneath Lily and eaten her whole.

“And now you’re on the outs,” Lucinda finished. “Don’t worry. I’ve got your back.”

Sitting next to Dorcas would have been better than this. Although maybe not, based on the death glare she was firing Lily’s way from her table with Wendy Wilde. Lily was stuck between one rock and another, closer, much more intimidating rock.

And also the third rock, really, of being trapped in Slughorn’s class. He started off with some boring monologue about meeting the Prince of Monaco, which had nothing to do at all with the lesson plan for the day. The story wasn’t even interesting—it involved him accidentally touching the Prince while reaching for the same shrimp on a platter—and it meant her attention reverted to panicking about Chat’s presence in the room.

Potter’s presence.

Because somehow, pathetically, she kept finding her gaze drawn to him. There was Chat’s messy hair, and hazel eyes, and brown skin, all topped off with Potter’s perpetually crooked glasses and his perpetually crooked smile.

Chat was in the room with her.

Chat fancied her.

Chat wanted to kiss her.

She tore her gaze away and forced herself to stop thinking about the way Chat was drawing his bottom lip in between his teeth…

It didn’t end up mattering that she wasn’t paying the slightest bit of attention to Slughorn, even when he did start up an actual lesson. Only twenty minutes into class, her phone buzzed in her bag.

Without meaning to, she locked eyes with Potter across the room. He was slipping his phone back into his bag.

How had they never noticed each other skiving off at the same time? And how would they both leave now, knowing that the other had to come up with an innocent-sounding excuse?

Potter all but ran for the loo, leaving his bag and things behind.

Lily sucked in a breath. If no one had ever suspected the true reason she left class before, she had to be fine now…

The next time Slughorn’s eyes passed over her while he lectured, Lily gave him an apologetic look. “Model thing,” she mouthed, pointing at her phone.

All her brownnosing paid off yet again—he nodded indulgently, and she slid out of the room.

Her heart was a tiny fluttering bird in her chest as she hurried out a side door of the school. She kept trying to tell herself this timing was a good thing. Yes, she had to go deal with Chat immediately, but at least they’d be too busy fighting to talk, and at least she could escape class with fewer repercussions than Petunia’s house. If Voldemort attacked now, she had a minimum of two days to sort out how to fight villains in the evenings.

As if the prospect of facing Chat wasn’t bad enough, this particular fight promised to be creepy and
borderline traumatic on top of things.

Lily had hoped that Voldemort would overlook this major attraction in favor of some of the less eerie elements of London, but of course he had to get there eventually.

Madame Tussauds was about to get much, much worse.

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James would have paced as he waited on top of Madame Tussauds if the building weren’t capped by a giant green dome. Instead he was stuck clinging to the spire on top, giving him horrific reminders of his time at the Tower of London. He only tolerated holding on for a minute before he leaped onto a blue cylindrical part of the building next door.

There he did pick up pacing, shoving a hand into his hair in the process.

Lily had been so weird that morning. He’d been so weird that morning.

He’d waited all weekend for her to text—not call, of course, that was too intense—but she hadn’t sent so much as a *hey*.

Which was fine. Probably. He’d told Sirius it was just that she needed time to process. It was a lot to take on, knowing that James Potter was Chat Noir. Just like he needed time to process that Lily Evans was Ladybug, and that they’d been unwittingly fighting crime together, and that they’d bloody well kissed…

He’d told himself it would be fine on Monday. Because it had to be fine. They’d see each other and laugh and the whole thing would blow over…

But it hadn’t blown over, and it wasn’t fine, and he couldn’t take another fight like last time. He didn’t want to die at the hand of a wax version of Jamie Oliver.

If he did die, it would be his own bleeding fault for blurting out that line about Potter values—undone by his incessant need to make stupid jokes…

Ladybug came swinging in from across the street. When she was in a good mood, she usually added in elegant flips and twists in the air just for fun.

Today she simply flew over the police blockade on the street and landed next to him.

His stomach sank.

“Er,” he said. “Hi.”

“Yeah,” she said, one hand clasping her other arm. “Hi. Hello.”

That was Lily Evans in front of him. Lily Evans with a ponytail and a mask and an amazingly, distractingly well-fitted suit.

A hundred odd questions pelted his brain, including: Did she still fancy him? Was she upset? Just how freaked out was she?

But this wasn’t the time for any of them, not when wax Marilyn Monroe was lumbering toward a copper down below. He watched in the corner of his eye as two other police officers launched themselves at her.

He cleared his throat. “How are you, er. All right, Evans? Shit—Ladybug.”
She pulled on her ponytail with one hand. “I’m, er, you know. And, ah, you?”

“Oh, you know, I’m…yeah.”

He had to be better than this, he had to beat this—he wouldn’t let something like wax Gandhi be the death of him—

“I’m annoyed,” he said, straining to keep a light tone, “because this is about to ruin Tussauds for me. So, you know. Thanks, Voldemort.”

One corner of her lips curled up, the tension in her shoulders draining a fraction. “Of course you love this place.”

“What’s not to love?”

A shriek rang out below.

“Besides that,” he added.

Ladybug reached for her yo-yo, and James took a step closer to her, preparing to slide his arm around her waist so they could swing down together—

Her upper body twitched away from him.

He yanked his hand back. “Shit. I mean, is this—can I—that is…may I?”

“Yes!” she said in a higher voice than usual. She seemed to steel herself and beckoned him closer. “Yeah, of course, because we are completely fine. This is the same as every other time we’ve done it.”

He shoved his arm into place around her quickly, like maybe she wouldn’t mind as much then—because she obviously did mind, didn’t she? And what was there to mind except his true identity?

He knew exactly how hard to hold onto her hip, knew how to twine his leg around hers to keep himself connected, knew how long it would take for them to arc onto the ground from this height. But even this minor act of tandem descent had his pulse sprinting and his palms sweating.

He was touching Lily fucking Evans.

He went on to battle a distressed, evilized tourist with her, which allowed him to occasionally forget her real name. It was easy to get distracted when he was busy ripping an arm off Jack Sparrow, dodging Ed Sheeran’s attempt to seal his mouth with wax, and then facing off against a triad of Princess Diana and two members of One Direction.

Every couple minutes, though, Ladybug’s identity would thunk itself down in the middle of his thoughts, and James would invariably slip up somehow.

At least Lily seemed to be having similar problems. Their eyes kept locking at odd moments, and she’d get stuck for a second before snapping back into action.

This pathetic villain should have been five minutes’ work at most. Wax figures were easy to rip apart, and unlike their fight against Wingman, James had no moral qualms about destroying the villain’s minions.

Pathetically, though, it took them a full twenty minutes, five occasions of them falling on their arses, and two instances of their heads banging together to set the museum back to rights.
While the police streamed in to help the traumatized tourists, James and Ladybug slipped out a back door.

James rubbed the back of his neck, his cat ears twitching. “D’you want to…should we…”

“Er,” she said, “I guess we should…” Her earrings beeped. “Talk later,” she finished, once more in that higher tone.

“Right. ‘Course,” he said. “Later.”

She swung away without another word, looking all too relieved. Just what every bloke wanted to see on the face of the woman he loved when she left him.

James pressed his palm against his forehead and groaned. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. They both fancied each other—or at least he hoped that was still true—so how could this be so hard?

He slunk back into class when Slughorn was facing the whiteboard. Sirius tried to get his attention, but it was fixed, as usual, on the red hair currently next to Lucinda Zheng. Lily was furiously scribbling notes and ignoring the not-subtle jabs into her side from Lucinda’s finger.

Lucinda swung a haughty look at James that he did not comprehend at all. That was frankly the least of his concerns, though. She was weird sometimes anyway.

“Are you and Evans pretending everything’s the same while you’re at school?” Sirius asked when class was over. “Because if you so, you are failing spectacularly.”

They were failing. They couldn’t pretend nothing had changed. Even at school, they were broadcasting SOMETHING IS WRONG vibes like bloody radios.

Clearly the thought of talking to him was as appealing to her as a moldy banana, but they did have to sort this out eventually. For the sake of beating Voldemort, if nothing else.

He ditched his mates and jogged to catch up with Lily, who was doggedly speed-walking away from Meadowes.

“Hey,” he said, and she slowed down, glancing over her shoulder. “When d’you want to—”

“Not here.”

“No, obviously, we’ve got class, but—tonight? After school?”

She looked pained. Actually pained. Which sent James’s stomach into a painful cramp of its own.

“Lunch,” she said. “We have to talk at lunch.”

“Yeah, sure, that’s fine, I—”

He stopped because she was clearly no longer listening. Her gaze had shifted from his face to just over his left shoulder. He turned around.

Snape stood down the hall, an immobile statue in a sea of shifting students, his face the picture of fury. If there hadn’t already been an akuma attack that morning, there would have been one within minutes, of that James was sure.

But then Snape’s face shifted. The fury retracted, morphing into…smugness. Smugness aimed directly at James. It had to be, since that was never a look he’d send at Lily.
She touched James’s shoulder. “Ignore him.”

James turned back to her. “Yeah, whatever, let’s—lunch. Okay. It’s a—plan.” He coughed. “Great.”

Which was easy enough to say. Actually enduring two more classes was another matter. He made it through, of course, but only by doodling a series of comics in which Voldemort turned out to be a tiny Communist snail. Also by fidgeting enough that Sirius stomped down on his shoe at one point to get him to stop shaking his desk.

“Will I regret it,” Remus asked Sirius on their way to lunch, “if I ask what happened with him and Lily?”

“Regret is a light word,” Sirius answered. “I often regret the existence of my parents, but this is a whole new level of dissatisfaction with my life choices.”

“So noted,” said Remus, which was fine by James. James had no plausible explanation for him anyway.

Lily was waiting for him outside the classroom.

Just last week, having her wait for him would have been the high point of his life. Not that he dreaded seeing her now—she sent his heart ricocheting just by existing—but that tense line to her mouth looked ominous.

Sirius made a quirk of a noise when he saw her.

“Still ridiculous,” he muttered, and stalked away down the corridor.

Remus and Peter naturally looked to James.

“He hates gingers,” James said, and waved them off. When they’d gone, he added to Lily, “He’s just extra peeved at you because—oh, er. He. Ah.” He checked around, then leaned in to say in a low voice, “He sort of…guessed. About you.”

“About…”

“How you’re…my partner.”

“He what—” She stopped, scoped out the many students still around them, and grabbed his wrist. “Come on.”

James would have gladly gone anywhere that Lily Evans dragged him because it meant she was touching him. If only it were under better circumstances now…if she weren’t about to potentially shatter his heart…

She pulled him into the empty history classroom and shut the door behind them.

“It’s my identity,” she said. “Dorcas doesn’t even know, and now Sirius bloody Black is in on it?”

“I didn’t tell him anything, all right? I was in a mood because of—obvious reasons. And he actually cared for once—which for the record, he’s never done before—and then he was asking all these questions about how things were going with you, and with Ladybug, and he…well, he guessed.”

“And you have no poker face.”

“I do so!”
She shoved her fingers into her hair. “Dorcas is going to kill me that he knew first.”

“Bloody best friends.”

“I know,” she sighed. “Shit. Eight months of perfect balance and it’s ruined in a day.”


She brushed past him to hop up onto a desk, inadvertently flashing a bit of thigh at him before tugging her skirt down into place. “This morning was completely embarrassing.”

Ruined was a strong word. Ruined was a harsh word.

James swallowed.

“At least I didn’t almost die,” he said.

“Except when the chandelier almost crashed onto your head, you mean?”

He’d lost track of wax John Lennon for a second, too busy thinking about how that was Lily’s arse bounding up the stairs. He’d escaped from the severed chandelier with only a few scratches on his face from flying glass.

“Well, yeah,” he said. “Obviously. But besides that… I mean, ruined?”

She didn’t seem to be listening, staring off at a window, nearly frowning. “When will Peter finish the map?”

Something wound around James’s heart and squeezed. She hadn’t texted over the weekend. She’d been avoiding him all day. She clearly couldn’t wait for the fight against Voldemort to be over…

“Later today,” he said tightly.

“Good,” she said, her shoulders sinking a little. “So we can look at it tomorrow over lunch.”

“Yeah,” he said. “If you like.”

Never mind the small fantasy he’d had of her coming back to his room to study it, of them sitting on his bed and laying out their plans, of things maybe progressing into more interesting directions from there…

“What’s the shortest time,” Lily asked, “that Voldemort’s ever gone between akumas? Like two days, right?”

“Er, yeah? I think so. ’Cause there were those two right around New Year’s—”

“Oh yeah. But it’s usually longer, right?”

“Er, think so. Like maybe three or four days.”

“That sounds right.” She smoothed out her skirt with her palms several times in a row. “That’s okay, then. We’re fine.”

His chest felt hollow. Somehow he managed to ask, the words stilted, “And why wouldn’t we be fine?”
“Oh, it’s just, er—well. You know how we thought we had until end of term to get him?”

“Yeah,” James said slowly. “Before your family moves.”

“Yeah, well…we’ve got to do it this week. Before his next attack.”

Cold panic shot through James’s veins. “Ohmygod,” he said. “Are you dying?”

“What? No, you bloody—I’m not dying.”

“Your sister’s moving you early?”

“No,” Lily said evenly. “She’s not doing that.”

This was worse than expected. If she really hated this, she didn’t have to be all shifty about it. He ached, oddly, for her to just come out and say what she clearly meant.

“Then what’s going on?” he said. “Why’ve we got to do it, like, now? We don’t even know who he is—”

“Will do later today, hopefully. Or have some sense of him…”

“So, what, you want to meet up tonight to talk it over? I mean, if we’ve potentially got two days—but why would we only have until the next akuma, I don’t—”

“No, I can’t—tonight’s not good.”

“So you’re saying we’ve got to move on this immediately, but also this is not your highest priority thing tonight.”

Her fingers clung tightly around the edge of the desk. “James,” she said. “It’s complicated—”

“No,” he said, his voice deadening. “It’s really not.”

It was obvious what the problem was here. It had nothing to do with catching Voldemort, and everything to do with minimizing the time she was forced to work with James.

“I just need this to be over,” she said. “Things have changed, and I can’t—I mean, I love being Ladybug, but things are happening that are making it…difficult. If that makes any sense.”

“Whatever.” He strode over to Binns’s preternaturally tidy desk, his back half toward Lily. “We can meet at lunch tomorrow to talk over the map and somehow magically come up with a plan to stop him within like a day.”

He took in the fastidious, tightly-packed notes for the next lecture. He’d been such an idiot, assuming things would work out, assuming that they’d finally got to a place where she wouldn’t be completely let down that it was him under the mask. What a fool he’d been months ago, daydreaming about letting his secret slip to her.

Telling her, even unintentionally, had bollocksed everything up.

“You can tell Remus and Peter,” Lily said.

“Tell them what,” James started, but he did not finish with that everything’s ruined?
“Who I am. If they know who you are…and I’m telling Dorcas today. There’s no…there’s no way around it with her, and I don’t—if you’ve got Black, then I can have her.”

“Fine, whatever. It’s over in a few days anyway.”

Clouded, gray light crept in to the dark room through narrow windows as silence stretched out between them.

“It’ll be weird,” she said. “When we’ve stopped him.”

James made a noncommittal noise. Weird was one word for it. Yesterday he might have chosen the ending *I was waiting for only better* as the best phrase. Now he didn’t know what it would be, other than probably still miserable.

He took a step away from her. “If there’s nothing else to talk about, then.”

“There’s that whole bit,” she said, “about how you’re you, and I’m me, and that’s…unexpected.”

“Yeah. I get it.” He gestured sharply at his face. “Not who you wanted it to be.”

“I didn’t *want* it to be anyone. You were just…you. Chat.”

Admittedly he’d pressed her to say it before…but now the blow had already been struck. He couldn’t stomach the thought of hearing it overtly now, of being kicked while he was already down.

“Right,” he said, readjusting his bag strap on his shoulder. “And I still am. But apparently…never mind. I’m hungry. I’m going to go eat.”

He headed for the door.

She slid off the desk to stand. “James.”

He stopped, one hand on the doorknob. “What?”

She looked like she was going to say something more, but then she pressed her mouth shut. “Never mind. I guess…we’ll talk tomorrow.”

He jerked his head into a nod and stepped into the empty corridor.

When the door had fallen shut behind him, he said, “Fuck. *Fuck.*”

“Yes,” said Algernon, poking his head out from inside James’s jacket. “You did fuck up in there.”

“I fucked up? *I—*” James lowered his voice and paced forward, pushing Algernon into his pocket. “I liked it better when you didn’t talk.”

Algernon muttered, “You’re an idiot.”

“Yeah, well…” James said to the magical creature that regularly gifted him with miraculous superpowers, “shut up.”

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Lily had had almost forty-eight hours to come up with something to tell Potter, and in the end she’d still come up short. There was no plausible lie to offer, and besides, the thought of lying to him made her skin itch.
He hadn’t taken the absence of the truth particularly well. Which was to be expected. She sounded super unreasonable to her own ears.

“You should have told him what’s going on,” Mary said, trying to wriggle out of a pocket in Lily’s school bag. “He’d understand.”

Lily tried to push her back in with one finger. “I’m starving. You can lecture me tonight when I’m miserable in the attic.”

Mary slid sideways around her finger to keep her head out of the pocket, hanging her tiny arms over the edge. “Lily,” she said. “Please rethink this. He can help—”

“He can’t change Petunia. He can’t change my legal situation. He can’t stop Voldemort without me.”

“I didn’t say he’d fix all your problems—”

“I just—it’s too much for him. I’ve just got Dorcas on board with everything—or will do, in a bit—but I dunno…”

“He helped you when you went to him about Petunia—he made you feel better, even if he couldn’t actually do anything about it.”

“Yeah, but that was smaller, and he was—it was a one-off, and it wasn’t like he knew it was me. And this is a life-burning-down problem. I can’t accidentally tell him who I am and then expect him to take on everything that’s wrong in my life, which is basically most of it right now.”

“Why not?”

“Because—because that’s not how the world works, Mary.”

“Lily,” Mary said gently. “I’m thousands of years old, remember?”

“I can’t do it, Mary, all right? I just—can’t.”

Lily hurried toward the door, pulling her bag strap over her shoulder. Mary would have to shut up once they were around other people.

Dorcas was almost definitely out waiting in the courtyard. Or possibly hunting the school looking for Lily and also answers. More likely the former. She had patience. She knew Lily couldn’t outrun her forever.

Not that Lily would be running anymore.

Just running into people.

“Oh!” she said, jumping back to avoid crashing into McGonagall as she came around a corner. “Sorry, wasn’t looking where I was going.”

“It’s quite all right,” said McGonagall.

She gave Lily a curious look, but didn’t say anything further. Lily waited a beat, just in case, then started to move past her.

McGonagall settled a hand on her shoulder, stopping her.

“Lily,” she said. “Do you like modeling?”
“No,” said Lily. “I mean, that is—”

Shit. She had not been expecting that question, least of all from McGonagall, and now she’d gone and blurted out the truth. Lily knew better than to say that on record. At least it was just McGonagall, who wouldn’t tell anyone.

McGonagall removed her hand. “I look forward to reading your essay.”

“Great,” Lily said pathetically, and continued toward the courtyard.

Dorcas was sitting eating a cheese sandwich under their usual tree. Lily settled down next to her, pulling her own lunch out of her bag, her heart thumping.

“If you’re going to lie to me,” Dorcas said between bites, “you can stand right back up.”

“Then it’s a good thing I feel very comfortable where I am, isn’t it?”

“Cut to it, then—what’s going on with you and Potter?”

“Well,” Lily said, opening a bag of almonds and trying to sound nonchalant, “first of all, I’m Ladybug.”

“You are not…” Dorcas began, but then she trailed off. She closed her mouth and tilted her head, squinting at Lily. Then she said flatly, “What.”

Lily smiled weakly. “Yeah.”

Months of secrecy, of hiding, of lies…and Lily had undone all that self-protective work in a second. Possibly as a mistake.

Dorcas threw her sandwich down onto her plastic lunch bag. “What the fuck. I should’ve seen it was you ages ago.”

“It’s not your fault. The magic’s pretty strong.”

Dorcas folded her arms, breathing out sharply through her nose, and stared at Lily.

In the past, she’d come closest to looking like this every time Lily had defended Severus’s choice of lunchtime companions. But even then, Dorcas had always tried to at least temper her irritation, if only because she so thoroughly believed in not telling Lily what to do.

Dorcas said, “I don’t like this.”

Lily hadn’t planned anything here, and maybe she should’ve, maybe she shouldn’t have told Dorcas at all—she couldn’t take alienating Dorcas now on top of Potter, what had she been thinking—

Lily stared down into her almonds. “This as in magic, or this as in…me being Ladybug?”

“The magic part. What bollocks.”

Lily looked up, a smile stealing across her face. A knot in her abdomen unwound itself.

Just one, though. There were plenty left behind.

“Some people would be amazed by magic,” she commented. “Only you would say it’s bollocks.”
Dorcas harrumphed and picked up her sandwich. “I don’t like things mucking with my head, all right?”

“No, yeah, I get it. It’s— weird.” Lily offered her an almond. “And I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier.”

Dorcas didn’t say anything straight away. Instead she took the almond. Held it up against the sun. And then popped it into her mouth.

It was probably fine, Lily told herself. Dorcas had never been one for big monologues. And Lily had just admitted to one of the city’s best kept secrets. She couldn’t expect Dorcas to start spewing off reactions like Potter, who telegraphed his every emotion. Dorcas would never copy any of his endearing, dramatic moves like flailing or squawking or rambling.

Which Lily had always loved about her, up until just now, when she would have killed for a heaved sigh or an over-the-top grin or any sign at all of what was going through her brain.

Dorcas bit into her sandwich, brow furrowed, and chewed. Thoroughly.

Lily considered stealing the rest of Dorcas’s lunch to avoid postponing things any longer.

“Well,” Dorcas said once she’d swallowed. “I don’t want to be angry. I am, a bit, that you didn’t tell me…but you’re a superhero, and like, it’s your life, yeah?”

“It is,” Lily said, leaning forward, the pent-up words set free at last, “but we’re friends, and I—I want to tell you stuff. I don’t like lying, or standing you up, or making you feel like I don’t care about you, and it’s all—I only did it to save the city, yeah? I mean, you must’ve been wondering where I was always running off to during class—you must’ve thought I didn’t trust you with something, and I hated that.”

She forced an almond in her mouth to shut herself up. This was about Dorcas.

Dorcas shrugged. “I figured you’d tell me when you wanted.” She stretched out her legs, crossing one ankle over the other. “I also figured you had IBS.”

Lily choked on the almond.

“Being Ladybug is much cooler,” Dorcas added.

Lily swigged down a gulp from her water bottle and pounded a fist on her chest.

“I love you,” she said. “Have I said that?”

“People don’t usually tell me that after choking.”

“No, but like.” Lily cleared her throat and set down her water. “Thanks for not being rude or whatever about this.”

“I’ll be angry later. Maybe rude, too.” Dorcas’s lips twitched. “After you tell me what’s up with you and Potter.”

Lily swept her hair back from her forehead with one hand. “Right,” she said. Damn her conscience for wanting Dorcas to know everything. “So. Backing up a bit again, but I swear this comes back around to that: you remember the boy I fancied from work…”

She tried to jump over as much as she could, but there was the whole becoming Ladybug thing to go over, followed by crushing on Chat Noir, trying to find Voldemort, kissing Chat Noir on top of
Dumbledore’s shop, almost watching Chat die, and then finally receiving something like romantic attention from him.

Dorcas only got bored at the kissing parts, so Lily made sure to hop over them extra quickly.

“So Chat and I were sort of getting there,” Lily said. “We were talking about the map on Saturday, and he was finally flirting with me, and then he, er, sort of…outed himself…” She sighed. There was nothing for it. “It’s Potter. Chat Noir is Potter.”

The impact of the words didn’t seem to hit Dorcas immediately. First there was a twitch to her lips, followed by a slight cock to her head.

Then pure delight spread across her face, her eyes lit up, her mouth stretching into an open-mouthed grin. She gave one full-throated, sharp laugh, and then another, and then she burst into a stream of laughter so hard she had to clutch her arms around her middle, her half-eaten apple falling onto the grass.

Students from around the courtyard turned toward them.

Lily swatted Dorcas’s arm. “Rein it in, yeah? People are starting to stare.”

“All year,” Dorcas wheezed. “All year and you two—”

“Yes, I know, it’s hilarious, now shut up! At least a little. Please, I feel stupid enough already.”

“Lucinda Zheng kept asking if you two were shagging on the sly—I thought she was a fucking madwoman—”

“She is!” Lily caught her voice and brought it down. “We weren’t—”

“I know,” Dorcas said, her body unfurling a little as her laughter finally began to subside. “I know but come on.”

“Yes, fine, it’s absolutely hysterical, we’ve been missing each other by miles for months, it would be funnier if it hadn’t sort of…fucked things up.”

Dorcas propped herself upright, her hands in the grass behind her, her grin still fixed in place.

“What’s there to fuck up?”

“Our—everything! I dunno.”

Lily went through her sort of flirting with Potter pre-reveal, and the stuff that had happened post-reveal, and restressed how awful fighting villains was when they were out of sync.

Dorcas said, “But you like him. And he likes you. What’s weird about that?”

“It’s weird because it’s—it’s complicated.”

“Seems pretty straightforward to me.”

“It’s not, though, it’s—I dunno.” Lily ripped a few blades of grass out of the dirt and tossed them on the ground. “I just—I fancied Chat so much, you know? There was no room for anyone else. But then Potter and I had those few moments—and I know you’re no good at boy stuff, but there’s no one else…” Lily pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. “I wish I could talk to—” She buried her face in her knees. “Oh, god, Potter. I wish I could talk to Potter like before all this happened.”
“Don’t tell me there’s more.”

“Wellll,” said Lily, lifting her head. “I sort of visited Potter twice as Ladybug…to talk about things…like Chat…”

Lily should have cut herself off earlier. Dorcas’s hysterical laughter was harder to bear the second time around.

“Are you done yet?” Lily asked at one point, when Dorcas finally collapsed onto her back on the grass, arms spread wide.

“Yeah, yeah. Just gimme a mo’.” Dorcas heaved a last laugh and sat up. “Right,” she said. “Thanks for telling me all that. I haven’t laughed so hard in ages.”

“How nice that my distress brings you so much joy.”

“Lily, come on. You and Potter will sort it out. It’ll be fine.”

“I don’t know that it will, though!”

“But you fancy Chat. And you fancied Potter, even before you knew he was Chat.”

“Yeah, but…it’s different now.” Lily squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, shaking her head. “I feel like a proper idiot. I mean I was flirting with Potter all along…and I didn’t know it, and I was doing it even when I didn’t like Potter. And I kissed him, you know? And he’s—he’s different as Chat. I mean he’s the same, but he’s—he’s mad for puns, for one thing, and he’s…I know they’re the same. I know it. Obviously. The magic’s all gone there, I can see it’s him now. But like…”

“He doesn’t feel like the same person?”

“Sort of? I mean, now that James is more…James around me, sometimes anyway, or he was—it was so Chat, it really was. But seeing him today, as Chat at Tussauds, I just—I can’t get over it.”

Dorcas raised an eyebrow. “It’s been like two days.”

“But I need to get over it now because we have to stop Voldemort. And we can’t wait to catch him because my window is screwed shut and sometimes I have to fight villains at night, remember?”

Dorcas’s expression sobered. “Oh shit. And if Petunia moves you to Sussex…”

“So I’m stuck.” Lily hugged her knees closer to her. “Just all around, and I can’t—we’ve got to catch Voldemort now. Before I get—before I can’t fight him at all, or before I—and I don’t know how to find him, and I don’t know what to do, and—”

Dorcas’s hand plopped down on top of Lily’s head, a warm, comforting weight.

“Hey,” she said. “It’s all right.”

She said it with such conviction that for a full second, Lily believed her.

“It’s not, though,” she muttered, looking down at her knees.

Dorcas took her hand off, and checked her phone for the time. “No, I know it’s not. But like…we’ll figure it out, yeah?”

Lily unwound her arms from her knees, and let her legs lay flat in front of her. “You said you were
bad at boy talk."

“This isn’t boy talk, this is fighting evil. Fighting evil sounds way easier.” Dorcas started tucking the wrappers from her lunch into her school bag. “You’re meeting with Potter tomorrow to look at some map?”

“Yeah, and I don’t—come with me. Please.”

“I thought that was a given.”

Lily had been alone for so long. Even when she’d had Severus, it hadn’t been like this. Even when she’d had Chat—except she’d never had him, not really, never outside of battle.

Or at least, mostly.

But Dorcas was here, Dorcas wasn’t completely weirded out by the truth, and Dorcas was helping. Even after Lily had lied to her, both outright and by omission, for months.

Her life might have been a giant pile of flaming rubbish…but not this part. She had this.

“Thank you,” Lily said. “God, Dorcas, I’m so—thanks.”

Dorcas shoved the rest of her belongings in her bag. “Don’t thank me now. I haven’t helped yet.”

“No, I meant for…I don’t know where I’d be right now if you hadn’t…”

Dorcas quirked a smile at her. “Yeah, whatever, don’t start crying on me. We’ve got Flitwick this afternoon and he might actually ask you what’s wrong in class.”

“Shit, he would, wouldn’t he?” Lily swiped away the couple unspilled tears from the corners of her eyes. “Right. Not crying.”

“Good.” Dorcas pushed herself up to stand, then turned and offered out a hand to Lily. “Come on, then. We’ve got plans to make.”

Peter knocked gently on Riddle’s door.

“Enter,” said Riddle.

Peter nudged the door open just wide enough to peek his head through. “You asked for me?”

“Yes. I understand you were occupied downstairs, but there are more significant matters to address.”

Peter approached the desk, more confidently than he had three months earlier, but still with lingering timidity. “I was just sorting out the mix-up with the ambassador’s reservation, like you asked—”

“I’m not here to scold you, Peter.” Riddle stood up, gesturing at two wingback leather chairs near the window. “Sit there.”

Peter’s mouth tilted, but he did as instructed and sat on the very edge of a chair. Riddle strolled to his tea cart, his body striped by the sun slicing through the blinds.

He picked up a prepared silver serving tray. “Tea?”

“Er,” said Peter.
Riddle strode forward with the tea set, as though Peter had agreed to the offer. “You’ve been with me some months now.”

“Four months next week.” Peter eyed Riddle as he set down the tray on the side table between them.

“Your help to our cause has been invaluable. The city and this hotel rely on stalwart people to keep them moving forward.”

Peter took the cup Riddle offered him, his pudgy fingers a tight fit for the tiny handle. “Er, thank you.”

“I like to think that I’ve had some influence on you, Peter,” Riddle said as he sat down. “For the better, I should say. Imagine the Peter of four months ago arguing with Stefan over a reservation.”

Peter took a sip of his tea. “Yeah, that’s true.”

“I employed you, Peter. I trained you. I did take care of your mother’s medical bills, incidentally. Pity the NHS won’t cover that service. The whole travesty of a system needs to be redone, don’t think I’m unaware of that. But I digress. The point is, Peter, that I reward loyalty. You know this to be true.”

“Yeah,” he said warily. “You do.”

Riddle picked up his own cup and regarded Peter for a minute.

“I’m aware that you’ve discovered certain…facts. About my, shall we say, hobbies.”

Peter sucked in a short breath through his nose.

“I saw the draft of your map—a personal errand you were taking care of at work, I might add.” Riddle reached out and traced the lip of his teacup with his finger. “As it happens, this offers the perfect opportunity to me, and by extension, to you.”

“Sir—”

“I was not finished.”

Peter sat still, his cup stuck halfway to his lap.

“You’re well aware of what I desire. And you find yourself in a predicament now, don’t you? I can’t fault you for creating the map—you knew not what you sought, and as I said, I find your handiwork will feed into my plans rather well. Because you must know, as I do, the face beneath the mask of Chat Noir.”

To his credit, Peter did not drop his cup. Nor did he flinch.

“So you see, Peter, I offer you a terrific opportunity once more. Because I don’t believe you’ve shared that map with them quite yet, have you?”

Peter studied his tea, watched the steam waft up from the surface.

Under Riddle’s unyielding stare, he said, “No. Sir.”

“As I thought.” Riddle leaned in toward Peter. “You sit poised between two forces, Peter. Your tactless friend and his witless companion on the one side, and on the other…” Riddle’s eyes gleamed. “We both know there can be no peaceful resolution here. So I ask you, once and only once, to
speculate on which side will win.”

Peter said nothing.

“You know perfectly well how things will end,” Riddle said, “although perhaps it scares you to admit it. But there is no need for fear, Peter. Lord Voldemort’s eternal debt, and therefore favor, awaits you. There will be no need for fear, not with the place you will hold when the dust has settled.”

Peter put down his tea cup, then balled his hands into fists on his lap.

“Consider, too,” Riddle said, “the...repercussions that might arise, should I learn that my faith in you has been...misplaced.”

Peter ducked his head. Riddle waited, unmoving, unflinching. The oak grandfather clock in the corner ticked relentlessly.

“What,” Peter said at last, slowly, carefully, “would you need me to do, exactly?”

Riddle’s mouth slid into a cool, thin smile. “Well…”
If James were diligent, he would have spent the evening coming up with ways to catch Voldemort. Even without knowing who Voldemort was, there were certain parts of planning he could have done, had he felt so inclined.

But he did not. He spent the evening on the sofa fending off worried and nosy inquiries from his mum. Which was just another thing to make him feel shitty, having to cut her out of things.

The only people who could help James through it were Sirius and Algernon, neither of whom had proven useful.

“Oh good,” Sirius said when James told him what had happened. “Then we can get back to our list of things to do to Snape.”

James sent him away after that, at which point Algernon zipped out from under the bed and hovered near James’s shoulder.

James sank onto his bed. “I don’t need to be mocked right now.”

Algernon gave him one of his classic don’t be stupid looks.

“You can talk,” James said. “But apparently even my own kwami doesn’t like me, so just…leave me alone.”

“I hate talking,” Algernon said. “But you’re being an idiot about Ladybug.”

“Suddenly you’re the big expert on human relationships. You’re a cat. A tiny, mostly mute cat. A tiny, mostly mute, superpower-granting—wait, no that’s good—”

Algernon sent him another look.

“Yeah,” James scoffed. “I’m definitely trusting you to read things better than me. I know Lily. I know Ladybug. And if she thinks everything is ruined—that I ruined everything—”

“She didn’t say that.”

“Funny, people don’t usually say things are ruined when they’re dead pleased with everything.”

“Watching her for eight months doesn’t mean you know her. People have problems they don’t tell strangers about—”

“I’m not a stranger!”

“This is why I told Dumbledore I didn’t want to do teenagers anymore. I can’t take the drama.”

“Drama—this is my life. Also, I like to think—well, I liked to think…it was a comedy.”

Algernon stared at him with his yellow eyes. “You’re so weird. It’s why I picked you, but—”

“You think I’m weird?”

“Stop thinking about yourself. Stop making this all about you.”
“I don’t see how this isn’t about me—”

Algernon growled. “This is why I don’t talk. Listen, kid. You worried all year about whether Lily was okay, but then the second you thought she might fancy you back, you stopped thinking about her. Forget whether she fancies you. She’s your partner. Does she seem all right?”

“She said things were ruined—”

“Not now—earlier. Before you couldn’t hold back your hilarious inside joke on the roof.”

“She—I mean…”

Before he’d accidentally revealed himself, Lily had been…at the bakery, that one time. Crying. Oh.

“Why do you think she was crying with my mum?” James asked.

Algernon didn’t say anything, just raised one tiny cat eyebrow.

Lily had been crying with James’s mum, which was weird. Then she’d missed school and had to make up the exam, but that was just her being Ladybug. Also her being herself, which was to say, super busy. She was always running around to model gigs and superhero fights and barely had time to talk to James because she was always trying to get home on time—her sister was always on the verge of killing her, apparently—

“Oh my god.” James’s hands flew up to clutch at his hair. “Is her sister trying to murder her?”

Algernon smacked his forehead with his paw and swooped down under the bed. James scrambled to his knees and bent over, letting his head drop toward the floor so he could peer at Algernon’s bowl.

“Is her sister going to murder her and then move to a new city and pretend she never had a sister?”

Algernon gave an annoyed meow.

James sat upright, straightening his glasses. “Well,” he said. “You’re just no help at all.”

He ignored Algernon the rest of the night. Which was easy, since Algernon stayed resolutely in his bowl, loudly chewing on some bacon James had hurled under the bed.

Whatever. James didn’t need his help anyway.

At least, not more help.

Because yeah, fine, maybe Lily wasn’t entirely all right. She’d had a rough life. She never talked about her parents’ car accident in the few magazine interviews she’d done, but that had probably been a brutal loss. And as a result, she was living with a sister that she had, he now remembered, called controlling—that Ladybug had said would sell her Miraculous to the highest bidder.

Lily had been spilling out about herself that day she’d walked him home because…because she’d needed someone to talk to. She’d even come to him as Ladybug just to get things off her chest.

But still. She’d said things were ruined now that they’d revealed themselves—or, fine, she’d said things had been balanced and now they weren’t. But how else was he supposed to take that?

He tried not to look at her at all the next morning, just to spite Algernon. As it turned out, though, it
was a difficult habit to break. He found his eyes drifting to her automatically, which meant he could see her slumping in her seat, and how her hair wasn’t as glossy and perfect as it usually was, and all right, yes, that maybe there was something else going on.

He let himself watch her more after that. She didn’t watch back. There were none of the stomach-flipping looks between them, where they both seemed to detach from everything else, stuck in a bubble outside reality for a second.

She was barely paying attention in class. At least Meadowes was at her side later on, nudging her into attention at the important parts of lectures.

“What’s wrong with her?” he asked Algernon in the loo.

Algernon burrowed further into James’s pocket by way of response.

“Useless,” James muttered, and went back to class.

At lunch, he and his mates headed for the English classroom, which McGonagall had begrudgingly agreed to let them use. Or she had once they’d reassured her that Lily Evans and Dorcas Meadowes would be with them. That part had got them a very baffled look, then a deeply concerned one, and then a “I’m not going to ask.”

“Extra credit,” James said.

“Of course it is,” McGonagall sighed.

Peter pulled out his laptop and began connecting it into the room’s projection system. He and Remus had taken the news about Ladybug’s identity well yesterday.

“Yes, I thought so,” Remus had said, at the same time that Peter had gone, “Ohmygod.”

James had said to Remus, “Right, where’s your magic wand?”

Remus had continued to argue that he was not, in fact, a wizard, which just secretly proved to James how much of a lie that was.

Because it was kind of obvious that Lily was Ladybug, now that James knew. He could see it more, in the curve of her smile, and the slice of her wit, and the particular fluctuations in her laugh. James had watched Lily for months, but somehow Remus, of all the people in London, had pieced it together.

Lily entered the classroom with Meadowes in tow. Despite the exhaustion Lily had been wearing earlier, she’d now donned her Ladybug \textit{I know exactly what to do and how to solve this} face.

He shouldn’t have invited everyone else. He needed to be alone with Lily again, to get to the bottom of this, to make that confident attitude something more than an obvious façade.

“Hello.” Meadowes assessed James and his mates where they stood clustered near McGonagall’s desk. She looked at James last. “So you’re the cat one.”

“Er, yeah. That’s me.” There was a certain crook to her mouth that made James say, “You laughed a lot when she told you, didn’t you?”

“Oh, yeah. Loads. Thanks for that.”

“She gets a laugh,” Sirius muttered. “I get an earful and a half.”
For months, Sirius had been the only one in the know. Or so James had thought. But now, in the space of a week, the world had shifted so that James now stood in a room with a whole five other people who knew, including Ladybug herself.

He didn’t know if that felt more like tragedy or comedy. Hopefully comedy, if the way Meadowes had laughed was any indicator.

“I couldn’t believe it,” Peter said to Lily. “When James told me about him, and then you…”

“That’s because he was lying.” Lily slid into a seat in the front row. “This is all a trick, actually.”

James couldn’t help himself. “To get a new team of teenagers to band together and stop Voldemort,” he added with verbal flourish. “We’re tired of the adults not stepping up.”

Peter said, in a low voice, “What?”

“We want all of us to become teen superheroes,” James said. “What color d’you want your costume to be?”

“Oh,” Peter said. “Got it.”

“Come on, Pettigrew.” Sirius smacked the back of his hand against Peter’s arm and went to a desk one away from Lily’s.

Peter ducked his head and returned to pulling up the map. He’d emailed it to James late last night, but it had seemed wrong, somehow, for James to look at it without Lily there.

While Dorcas took up the seat on Lily’s other side, Remus filled in the gap between Lily and Sirius. James hadn’t told him or Peter about the weirdness with Lily. They probably would have been just as useless as the last time he’d asked for romantic advice.

“So,” Remus said to Lily. “How have you liked being a superhero?”

Lily’s eyes shot over to James. Then she seemed to realize what she’d done, her eyes widening slightly, and turned her head back to Remus.

“I wouldn’t trade it for anything,” she said. “Could do with better pay, though. Maybe some light supervision.”

James found himself smiling, even though Meadowes was still staring at him intently. Hopefully that was her being weirded out that he was Chat, and not her being angry or annoyed with him on Lily’s behalf.

Peter stepped back from the desk, gesturing at the screen. “I’m ready.”

Remus might as well not have existed, Lily whipped her attention away from him so quickly.

“Brilliant,” she said.

James gave him a nod to begin.

“So, er,” Peter said. “I’ve no idea if this is going to help or not. I mean, I really hope it does, but—”

“It’s fine, Pete. You did your best. Let’s see it.”

“Right then.”
With a click of the mouse, the map appeared in front of them. The bright red dots hadn’t changed since the last version, but Peter had added two translucent grey circles on top of them, light at the edges and darkening toward their centers. The circles overlapped in the middle, creating a sort of oblong shape containing nearly every attack.

Peter wrung his hands. “The dual cluster method was much more successful than the single cluster —”

He kept talking but James couldn’t hear him over the sudden ringing in his ears.

If he’d gained anything from being Chat Noir, it was an intricate familiarity with the notable landmarks of central London. His mental map of the city these days had become nothing more than a complex quilt of intersecting former battlegrounds. No tourist attraction, no Tube station, no alley in those few square miles was a mystery to him.

He knew exactly which landmark fell into the center of the right circle.

He knew exactly which landmark fell into the center of the left circle.

And he knew exactly which villainous figure worked at city hall and lived at the ritzy hotel off Green Park.

His heart stumbled for a second as he made horrified eye contact with Lily.

“Of course,” Lily breathed, her palms flat on the desk as she pushed herself out of her seat.

James shoved a hand into his hair, tugging until it hurt. “We thought we were idiots before—”

“It’s so obvious—”

“What’s obvious?” Meadowes asked.

“Riddle,” Remus said calmly.

Sirius’s chair screeched as he shoved it backwards while launching to his feet. “Bastard.”

“What?” asked Peter, in a small voice. He peered at the map. “But he wouldn’t—he’s not… He’s already the mayor. He’s already rich.”

“Greedy bastard,” Sirius pronounced.

Meadowes said, very evenly, “I fucking hate him.”

Lily’s eyes had locked on James, and his on hers, and the other people in the room ceased to exist.

“All those times,” she said, fists clenched at her sides, “that he criticized us for not catching Voldemort—for not catching him!”

“When he went on about Voldemort’s anti-wealth agenda—”

“When he pointed fingers at low-income people and immigrants—”

“Throwing the blame everywhere else.”

“Throwing the blame at us!”
“We should’ve known.”

“Bastard.”

Lily, like James, looked ready to hurl chairs at the wall.

He settled for kicking McGonagall’s desk instead, while Lily threw herself back into her seat, arms crossed, a furious set to her mouth.

“What are you waiting for?” Sirius demanded of James. “Go take him down.”

Much to James’s pleasure, he shared a quick look with Lily that said everything they needed to communicate. That part, luckily, hadn’t been totally ruined.

She made a frustrated noise. “We can’t,” she said. “We need to get the Moth Miraculous back, and he clearly doesn’t wear it all the time or we’d have recognized it.”

By which, of course, James knew she meant their kwamis would have recognized it. James didn’t even know what the Moth Miraculous looked like—for all he knew, it was a butterfly hair clip.

He really, really hoped Riddle was forced to wear a butterfly hair clip.

“So we’ve got to catch him in the act.” James shook his foot, his toes throbbing. “The next time there’s a villain, we’ve got to ignore it and go find him instead.”

Lily gave a sharp nod. “The only other way would be to search the hotel and city hall, and that would take ages. Plus, if we got caught searching, he’d slaughter us in the press.”

“Or literally.”

“And we only have until his next attack to figure it out.” She laughed darkly. “Brilliant.”

Remus folded his hands on his desk. “You don’t necessarily have to make your move during the next attack. We can take the time to make more thorough plans, and act later.”

Lily froze for a moment. Then she held a hand up in front of her, studiously examining her nails.

Riddle stopped mattering in an instant.

Whatever was going on with Lily, she didn’t want to tell James, much less his mates.

“No,” James said. “We’ve got to plan for the next akuma.”

“Why?” Peter asked.

Meadowes crossed her arms. “Because.”

“Because Meadowes has deemed it so.” Sirius draped an arm over the back of his chair. “Wonderful. She’s known about this for a day and is already making important decisions. Makes perfect sense, that.”


He dared a glance at Lily. She was still looking at her hands, her fingers now curled into her palms. He watched as she tightened them, nearly into fists, and then flexed them open again.
He could bluster and lie through nearly anything, but he’d failed her—his mind had come up blank on this one.

Lily dropped her hands onto the desk. “It’s because...” She exhaled. “It’s because I’m grounded.”

Meadowes’s eyes threatened imminent death to Sirius.

“Oh!” said James, his mouth curling into a smile. “Yes. Because she’s grounded. That’s why.”

“So?” said Sirius. “Just because they say you can’t leave doesn’t make it true. I should know.”

“It’s more complicated than that,” Lily said tightly.

It really had to be—she wouldn’t pull that card over nothing. Ladybug would have done anything short of maiming and murder to get to a battle. And possibly even the former.

She went on, “So I can make the next battles if they’re during the school day, but the evening ones… I can only make one more. Because if I sneak out and my sister catches me…well, I don’t know what she’ll do, but I doubt I’d be able to show up to any fights after that.”

Remus hummed. “And without Ladybug, there’s no victory. I see. Exactly how long are you grounded for?”

Lily pressed her lips together. “Probably until end of term.”

This was terrible news, really, James knew that…and yet his heart was dancing a samba because she didn’t hate him! Probably. She wasn’t tired of him, just grounded until her family moved.

Again, probably.

But still!

“Sirius makes a fair point,” Remus said. “Being grounded doesn’t mean you’re chained to a chair. You could still leave the house, but with additional repercussions.”

“Right,” said Meadowes. “So that’s settled—”

Sirius raised an eyebrow. “It is not.”

“Sirius,” Peter said carefully. “If Lily says we’ve got to do it soon, then she probably knows best. Don’t you think?”

Remus’s lips twitched. “Quite clearly he does not.”

“The point is,” James said, repressing a cheery smile, “that we’ve got to get thinking. Hopefully the next attack’s during the school day so we have more time to come up with ideas…but we really have to plan like he’ll attack as early as tomorrow.”

Lily nodded. “We need to be ready to put our plan into action as soon as we can after he akumatizes the next victim. We’ve no way of knowing when that will be, but—”

“Don’t we?” Meadowes jerked her head at Peter. “You’re his assistant, yeah?”

“Ohmygod.” Peter plopped down onto the edge of McGonagall’s desk. “I’m Voldemort’s assistant.”

“Knew he was a bastard,” Sirius muttered.
James nearly let off a desperate laugh. He’d thought he and Lily missing each other had been ridiculous, but Peter working for a super villain bordered on slapstick.

And actually, that was a bit of a comfort. This really sounded like a comedy now, and James could get behind that.

Remus leaned forward, glancing at Peter’s phone on the desk. “I believe you have Voldemort’s calendar synced on there, yes?”

Peter snatched up his phone and began frantically tapping and scrolling.

“Even if we don’t know when he’ll attack next,” Lily said, “we can still plan to confront him after it shows up. The problem is, what do we do when we find him wearing the Miraculous?”

“Hold him down and rip it off him?” James offered.

“If it’s just the three of us, probably, but this is Riddle. He’s powerful and I bet a little paranoid. He might have plans ready in case we ever attack—for all we know, he’s got a gun.” She looked at Peter. “Does he have a gun?”

“Hm?” Peter lowered his phone. “Er, not sure.”

Remus made a discontented noise. “Riddle doesn’t seem the type to be unprepared for these situations.”

Meadowes waved a hand. “You’re never gonna know in advance what weapons he has,” she said. “What you need is leverage. That’s the only way you can count on forcing him to do anything.”

James made a mental note to bring in a proper cake later. Meadowes had more than earned it, and biscuits wouldn’t cut it for this level of excellence.

“Well reasoned,” Remus said. “The question is, then, what does Riddle care about?”

James and Lily looked at one another.

“Er, money?” James tried.

“Power,” said Lily.

“Terrible fashion.”

Her lips twitched. “Butterflies and moths, apparently.”

James grinned at her. “Evil laughter.”

“We should get a gun,” Meadowes said, ruining James’s perfect moment. “He’d turn over the Miraculous if we threatened his life.”

Predictably, Sirius perked up at this development. James tried to quell him with a look. He’d have tried to corral Meadowes, but that was Lily’s job.

Lily grimaced. “He definitely values his own life, but we’d never kill him, and he knows we wouldn’t.”

“Of course not,” James said. “We’re not killing anyone.”
“So send me in with a gun,” Meadowes said. “I’m Black and he’s a racist arse—he’ll definitely be scared of me the second I show up.”

Sirius assessed Dorcas approvingly.

“Don’t even start,” James told him. “We don’t have a gun, we’re not going to kill him, and if he does have a gun or something—well, if I get hurt, it’s fine. Ladybug will fix it with magic when she de-evilizes the akuma later.” He poked Peter. “Did you find anything on Riddle’s calendar?”

Peter set down his phone and rubbed his palms on his thighs. “Well…maybe. I dunno. It could be something else, but…every time there’s been an akuma attack when I’ve been around…he usually has a private meeting set up on his calendar. He doesn’t have a lot of appointments I can’t see the details of—barely any, really. I never thought about that connection—I’ve seen him during attacks, you know, a couple times, but I guess he can do that…” He looked between Lily and James, a worry line creasing his forehead. “There’s a private appointment tomorrow night. At the hotel.”

One day.

They’d fought him for eight long months—he’d gone up to a week between akumas before—and now they had one bloody day to figure out how to end it.

Then again, they’d identified him within a couple of weeks. So how hard could it be?

Lily’s mouth twisted. “We’ll have to do it tomorrow, then, whether we’ve got a plan or not.”

She only had one shot. For reasons James didn’t remotely understand, but he was confident they were good ones.

“Well maybe,” he said, “we need to make sure there is an attack tomorrow night before you run away. ‘Cause we only know he’s got a private appointment, not that he’s going to for sure make a villain.”

“We can confirm there is a villain first,” Remus told her. “Peter can be at the hotel watching for an attack, and then we can text you once we’ve learned it’s worthwhile to run off.”

Meadowes cleared her throat, eyes narrowed, apparently because she was weird about technology or something.

Lily studied the desk in front of her. “No,” she said quietly. “That won’t work, because…because Petunia took my phone on Saturday.”

Her sister had taken her phone.

It didn’t matter that his mum had given Lily his number—Lily literally couldn’t have texted him over the weekend, even if she’d wanted to.

Her sister’s cruelty should not have made him so giddy. Especially not when Lily was hanging her head as she said all this, her fingers clenched together again. He might’ve tried to hug her, both out of joy and empathy, if the others hadn’t been there.

Curse his decision to draw them in.

Except how he and Lily would be nowhere without them. That part was great.

“Then we’ll email,” James said. “Problem solved.”
Lily still wouldn’t look up. “She also…took my laptop.”

Meadowes was properly glaring at James now, her arms folded. But it wasn’t his fault—how was he supposed to have known that Petunia would be so—

“Fucking ridiculous,” he said. “You need that for school and things.”

“Yes,” Lily said. “I’m aware.”

“So what if she’s taken your phone?” said Sirius, and James briefly considered punching him until he added, “Get another one.”

James could have hugged Sirius too, then. Everyone could have a hug, even Meadowes, because Lily hadn’t chosen not to communicate with him, and because she hadn’t chosen to give up being his partner, and also because this was all a bit fucking much to take in.

Lily raised her head slowly and blinked. “Oh,” she said. “I could, couldn’t I? I’ve got the money.”

“We’ll get you a phone later,” Sirius said. “There, fixed. Let’s go back to planning how to kill Riddle.”

“We’re not—Sirius.” James slid him a look. “We’ll get back to that. But yeah, Lily, we’ll get you a phone this afternoon. That’s easy enough.”

Lily’s cheeks tinged pink. “You don’t have to—that’s really not—it’s stupid if I point out you’ve got class, isn’t it?”

“Very,” said Sirius. “Now, personally, I vote kill him because why not?”

As he’d done many times before, Remus began laying out the very pragmatic reasons they couldn’t murder someone, starting with the problem of corpse disposal. Sirius always hated hearing about bodies dissolving in acid.

They spent the rest of the hour talking through what they could do, murder aside, but nothing concrete came of it. There were simply too many unknowns, and not nearly enough time to address them.

James participated with about ninety percent of his brain. Maybe eighty-five percent. The rest was occupied, as usual, with watching Lily.

She was grounded. She couldn’t leave whenever she wanted or something worse would happen. Although what was worse beyond that…

Getting pulled out of Hogwarts. Losing her job. There were obviously things on the line.

Maybe it was about him, and maybe it wasn’t, but she needed help. And they could give it to her.

James would buy her a new secret laptop, if she’d take it. How was she supposed to do her schoolwork without a computer? And without being able to stay at school or go to the library because she was stuck at home? It was unbelievable. Her sister really was a bitch and a half. No wonder Lily was always running home to her as late as possible—she had to contend with this fuckery all the time.

The relief that he personally hadn’t ruined her entire life—that in fact someone else was very clearly responsible—was nearly all-encompassing.
Nearly.

He tried to make it good enough. She’d told him eventually, and it explained everything, and none of it was his fault…but there was a persistent pebble in his proverbial shoe that he simply couldn’t shake out.

Namely that Lily hadn’t trusted him with any of it.

His mind honed back in on the conversation when Sirius said, “I could stand guard outside his office —”

“No,” said James. “No, you’re absolutely not going to be there.”

“We’re catching him. I’m helping. Good discussion, mate, let’s have it again sometime.”

Meadowes nodded. “Good point, Black. I’ll be there too.”

“No,” James said, his pitch spiking. “You can’t—you two don’t understand—”

“What James is trying to say,” Lily said with what James thought of as restrained panic, “is that he’d turn you into leverage against us.”

“Exactly, thank you. He’s had villains take hostages before, and it’s…well, it hasn’t worked, but it was…”

“Awful,” Lily said quietly.

James swallowed. There were a couple times they’d come too close to testing Lily’s ability to bring back the dead with Miraculous Ladybug magic.

“Yeah,” he said. “I get it, but don’t—I know you want to help, Sirius. ‘Course you do, you’re my best mate, but this is…” He looked at Lily. “This is a superhero thing. I have a different partner for that.”

That drew a hint of a smile out of Lily, one that got his heart doing backflips.

His mouth grinned stupidly. It was not situationally appropriate. And yet he could not seem to force it away, not even when he saw that Sirius’s expression had darkened to something like mutinous, a muscle twitching in his jaw.

Lily got them all back on track after that, thinking through different ways things could play out in Riddle’s hotel. Even after another ten minutes, though, they still had no real plan besides show up and hope for the best.

It wouldn’t matter, though. He and Ladybug had always made up things as they went along, and it had always worked out for them.

When they’d taken down the map and erased the whiteboard, and everyone was getting up to go back to class, James touched Lily’s arm.

“Hey,” he said. “So, er. D’you have a second after school? I’ll give you the phone.”

“Oh, yeah.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “That’s…great. Thanks. You really don’t have to—”

“—buy you the newest iPhone? You’re right, I don’t. I might. We’ll see, I get easily distracted by
shiny things.”

A sly smile flitted into existence, just briefly. “A cat through and through, I see.”

If he’d been Chat at the moment, his ears would’ve twitched happily.

“Let’s just hope,” he said, “that our attack isn’t a cat-astrophe.”

There was that classic, flat Ladybug look for Chat. “We’ve got no plan to confront an evil villain,” she said, “and you’re expending mental energy coming up with puns.”

“What can I say, I’ve got faith in us. We’re a purr-fect team.”

She groaned, and reached one hand up to where his cat ears would have been—but of course her fingers only skimmed over his unruly locks.

James sucked in a sharp breath.

His existence became nothing more than a roar of rushing blood, and the ever-so-slight shifts in his individual strands of hair.

She jerked her hand back, red flooding her face. “Sorry.”

He shivered, his brain slowly kicking back into gear.

Except mostly it was now thinking that he was not going to get an erection from this.

He was not.

“It’s fine,” he managed, grabbing his school bag for a shield. “Gotta get to class.”

“Yeah,” she said, averting her eyes. “Same.”

“I should’ve got you another phone,” Dorcas said thoughtfully after their next class. “Can’t believe I let Black come up with that one.”

Lily tucked her notebook into her bag. “I can’t believe they’ve just run off to buy me a bloody phone.”

They had done, with an audacious wink from James before they strolled out the door.

“They have always seemed to take care of their own,” said Dorcas. “And since you and Potter are…”

Lily cleared her throat. “We’re not—it’s not…I dunno.”

“Whatever. The point is, Black knows what’s what. He wants Voldemort gone, too.”

“I think it had more to do with murdering Tom Riddle than helping me, but I’ll take it.”

Black had suggested the phone solution so quickly and neatly. Like it wasn’t a big deal, suddenly skiving off class to purchase something for someone he’d barely spoken to all year.

He’d talked murder more than Lily would have liked, but James was on top of that.
In fact, James had been downright responsible during their lunchtime meeting. And a little off the
wall, here and there, but mostly dedicated to catching Riddle. He and all his mates had been, and
Dorcas had taken this all in stride, and they were all there to chip in, and yeah, they didn’t have
anything like an actual plan, but it was just…

Dorcas flashed a smile at her. It was silly, really, how such a small gesture could knock the specter of
Lily’s anxiety nearly flat.

She was going to have a phone. She was going to have contact with people, and she was going to
arrest Tom fucking Riddle, and maybe, just maybe, things would go back to normal.

After James and Black wandered into Flitwick’s class with no explanation other than “got lost,”
James’s eyes immediately found hers. His mouth slipped into a goofy grin, pleased with himself,
pleased with life, and that was so…him. So Chat. They had a slim chance of success and there he
was, totally nonchalant about it, because he trusted himself, and he trusted her.

As well he should. They were an unbeatable team.

An unbeatable team that hadn’t noticed each other’s identities, or Riddle’s, but there was magic
involved there. That wasn’t entirely on them.

After their last class, James lingered near his desk, clearly trying to look like he was paying attention
to his mates’ conversation. His eyes kept checking in on her, though.

“Text me,” Dorcas said. “Don’t sulk alone tonight.”

“The bigger magic trick will be getting me to shut up.”

“Perfect. Now go, your puppy is waiting for you.”

“He’s a cat, thank you.”

Dorcas rolled her eyes and shoved Lily toward him. Lily mouthed a genuine thanks back at her and
then turned to James. He ignored his friends at once, his body shifting to face her, that familiar smile
back in place.

He was always so happy to see her.

She was not going to cry about that. That would have been ridiculous. Sure, she’d slept a grand total
of perhaps four hours, and was on the verge of a complete life collapse, but she wasn’t about to be
emotionally undone by that one act.

Or at least, not in front of him.

“So,” she said.

“So.” His hands were deep in his pockets as he rocked up onto the balls of his feet, and then back
down again. “Should we, er, go somewhere else?”

“This isn’t a drug deal. You can give me the phone in public.”

“I was hoping—I mean, if you’ve got a minute…that we could talk?”

“Oh, er, yeah.” She might’ve said no, if he had looked less hopeful, if he hadn’t just done her an
enormous favor, if she weren’t so unraveled every time she stood too near to him. “I mean, really just
a minute, I can’t be home later than that.”
“Yeah, no, I got that. Come on.”

She followed him out into the corridor, then stepped forward to walk at his side. While all the other students made for the front door, he guided her toward the back, through the throngs of chattering students.

“You all right?” he asked. “Earlier, you seemed…”

“I’m…” She shifted slightly closer to him to avoid walking into Wendy Wilde, keenly aware of the meager few centimeters that separated her body from his.

“Don’t say fine.”

“Of course I’m not bloody fine.”

His elbow nudged hers. “Obviously.”

She shouldn’t have been surprised he knew that. Exhaustion had kept her from pretending to be all right most of the day. And he—he fancied her. He was her partner, so of course he was paying the slightest bit of attention. But still.

No one but Dorcas had been watching since January.

They’d passed through the sea of students heading out. Only a few students lingered in the corridors here, talking to each other or checking their phones.

James stepped into the atrium beside a flight of polished wooden stairs, and then into a small alcove beneath the landing. He had to duck his head slightly to enter, a few locks of hair bending where they brushed the ceiling.

She slipped in sideways to face him. There was no lamp above them, just the light from the stairwell casting half his face in shadow, and glinting off his dark eyes.

The din of departing students echoed down the corridor.

James was still waiting for an answer.

“I’m feeling,” she finally said, “too many things at once.”

“Oh, god,” he said, the words bursting out of him. “Me too. Not as much as you, though. I mean, I imagine.”

She let her body fall backward a few inches, until her shoulders lay flat against the wall, and heaved a deep breath. “I mean, first of all, it’s Riddle,” she said. “Tom fucking Riddle.”

James let out a short, humorless laugh. “I know.”

“He’s the bloody mayor, and he’s a super villain, and even with six minds on it, we’ve basically come up with no plan at all.”

“That’s not fair to the crumb of a plan we baked up earlier.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Try that reassurance again, this time without the terrible bakery joke.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Would you prefer a hot crossed pun?”
That self-satisfied light in his eyes was all Chat.

“No,” she said, her voice going a little hoarse.

“Are you sure? I can rise to the occasion.”

“Chat—”

“I’m on a roll here, Lily. These are not crumby jokes.”

Riddle was still a bastard, and so was Petunia, and so was the world in general, but that was all drowned out by the familiar swooping sensation in her stomach.

“James,” she said, fighting very hard to keep a stupid smile off her face. “One minute. Remember.”

“Right. Right.” He pulled a small smartphone out of his back pocket and placed it in her waiting palm. “I don’t have Meadowes’s number or I’d have put it in there for you.”

“Such a gentleman.” She swiped to wake up the screen. He’d set the background as a dashing action shot of Ladybug and Chat Noir on top of Westminster Palace. “Correction: such a narcissist.”

When she clicked on contacts, she found a few other numbers had already been added.

“Who’s Padfoot?” she asked.

“Sirius. I’ve just always wanted us to have secret nicknames, but then I got a secret identity, and it seemed like two nicknames would be confusing.”

“You’re ridiculous,” she said, unzipping a pocket to slide the phone in.

“No arguments here. Oh, and also.” He let his bag strap slide down off his shoulder and into the crook of his elbow. Within seconds, he’d extracted a thin laptop the size of a large book. “Here.”

She pushed it back toward him. “James—”

“Don’t tell me it’s too much because you need it, all right? For school. And sanity.” He slung his bag back over his shoulder. “You can give it back later or whatever, but please take it for tonight. Or at least until you get yours back.”

She did need it. And it wasn’t charity—she could buy her own, if she only had the freedom to leave the house. Not to mention he would take it back. She’d fly up to his rooftop patio and leave it there if she had to.

“All right,” she said. “Just for now.”

“Good.” He watched her slide it into her own bag, where she hid it between two textbooks, and then he glanced at his watch. “It’s been more than a minute.”

“I know,” she said, a frisson of anticipation running through her.

He could have pressed her about her grounding at lunch, about why she couldn’t just leave or why her sister felt compelled to trap her, but he hadn’t. He’d tried to help shield her. She’d had to fess up, at least a bit, but he’d been on her side about it.

He’d always been on her side.
It should not have been an enormous admission, but it felt earthshattering to tell him, “I don’t want to go home.”

“Then come home with me,” he said at once. “Or Meadowes, or Remus, or anyone, just don’t…”

She smiled bitterly. “I can’t.”

He squeezed his eyes shut behind his glasses, bracing one hand on the wall beside him. “Lily,” he said, in a low, uncertain voice.

“Yes?” she said.

“I know you don’t…like you don’t owe me anything or whatever, I get it, but could you—would you, I mean, I just don’t get why you didn’t…I mean you were only grounded yesterday, and you could’ve said so, and I…”

Her mouth clammed shut as she turned her head sideways.

“It’s just,” he went on, now looking at his shoes, “that like…you told me stuff before. When you were Ladybug, I mean, and we were at my house, and…I dunno.”

Her face heated as her fingers plucked at her bag strap. “I dunno,” she said. “It was…different. You didn’t know it was me, so it was like…talking to a stranger.”

He swallowed, and then gave a soft, short, “Oh.”

“Not like that, I mean—I mean like it didn’t count, I mean like…” She had to say something, she couldn’t say nothing, but this was like pulling something up through her throat. “It’s like how you could tell someone on the Tube your darkest secret and it wouldn’t be the same as telling your mum because they don’t care about you, and there’s no—nothing’s different after you’ve done it except you’ve got a weight off your chest. They listen and you walk away and it never matters that you told them.”

His shoulders hunched up a bit, his face still toward the ground.

His glasses slid a fraction down his long nose.

“Well, I am here,” he said, “and it does count, and I want it to count, yeah? ’Cause like—that first day, with Silvia Dodgson, you let me help you straight off and I’d—I hadn’t done anything yet, and you had to tell me everything, and now… You were the one who said I did a decent enough job at helping people, and—and we’re bloody partners.” His eyes flicked up to hers. “I want to help.”

At various points in time, she’d described her life as a hot mess and a raging bonfire and a complete shit show, but here she was, at the center of a storm, and he’d gone and stretched out a hand through all of it.

“You did help,” she said, the words flooding up and out of her mouth. “I just—I didn’t—this whole thing is so…embarrassing.”

“Getting grounded isn’t—you saw the wall of pictures of you in my room—my middle name is literally Oddjob—”

“No, but like…it’s not that sort of embarrassing, it’s—” She wet her lips and let the words spill out at last: “It’s because I’m Ladybug.”
His expression softened, not with pity, but with a tiny, funny quirk of his lips and a gentle exhale of breath that said *I understand.*

A door unlocked somewhere in her ribs.

“And Petunia’s trapped me in,” she said, her heart pounding furiously. “She’s screwed my window shut and I think if I run off again—I think she’ll actually lock me in altogether. And I’m bloody Ladybug and she’s trapped me, not just with the window, but I can’t leave, she’d ring the police if I did, and they wouldn’t really come chase me down, not if I’d only been gone for twenty minutes, but there’d be a record of the call, and the paps would find it, and she can ruin my life and she knows it, and I’m supposed to be better than this but I—”

“Miss Evans. There you are.”

Lily’s mouth snapped shut, blood rushing to her face at the sight of McGonagall standing outside the alcove.

“Your sister is here,” said McGonagall.

“No,” said Lily, without meaning to.

“I can assure you, she is.” McGonagall’s lips thinned. “The pitch of her voice would make it difficult to pretend otherwise.”

Lily’s pulse thundered in her skull. Her sister didn’t even trust her to come home on time—once Lily did break out of the house, Petunia would definitely lock her in, and probably put bars on the window to boot, this was insanity, this was inhumane—

James’s hands came down solidly on her shoulders. She tilted her head back to look up at him.

“Just get through tonight, yeah?” he told her, eyes riveted on hers, and for a moment she didn’t feel like she was drowning. “You don’t have to be better—we’ve got this.”

He’d said the same thing during their very first fight, back against Silvia Dodgson, back before either of them knew enough to promise anything.

He hadn’t let her down yet.

She took a deep breath and nodded.

He cast a soft smile at her. “I’ll text you puns.”

“Oh god, don’t—”

McGonagall cleared her throat. “You’d better come along, Miss Evans.”

Lily sent a last look up at James, who slid his hands off her shoulders, and they both stepped out of the alcove.

His hand brushed along her arm. “I will, though.”

Lily bit down on her bottom lip to keep from smiling, and then told him, “You’d better,” before darting forward to McGonagall.

She didn’t let herself look back until they’d reached the foot of the stairs, only to find him watching her, one hand ruffling up his fantastic hair.
Even if there was an akuma attack tomorrow night, it wouldn’t all be over. Her life would not be set straight by Voldemort going to jail.

But at least the city would be safe.

And at least she had Chat Noir on her side.
“She was grounded!” James told Algernon once they’d got home. He did not add why Lily had been so secretive about stuff because that was her business, and his since she’d told him, and Algernon’s by default since he was technically in James’s pocket for all of it. But it really wasn’t for Sirius to hear.

Algernon tried to place his paws over his ears, but his arms were too short, so he just glared.

“I agree with your weird cat that you should shut up,” said Sirius from the oversized chair in James’s room. “We heard her ourselves. Repeating it at louder volumes doesn’t make it news.”

“Yeah, but like—this is the best news. I mean, for me. Not for her. It’s awful for her. D’you think I could successfully plot her sister’s assassination?”

“No, because you’ve all the stealth of a drunken baboon.”

Algernon meowed in agreement.

“First,” James said, pacing along his floor, “I bet baboons don’t even like alcohol. Second of all, at least pick an animal in the cat family for relevancy. And thirdly, I am a renowned superhero.”

“That’s my doing,” said Algernon.

“It’s rubbed off on me,” James said. “I’m certain of it.”

“Talk more about murder,” Sirius said, “but Riddle’s. I can’t hear enough about that. Especially the part where I get to do something.”

James stopped pacing. “Sirius. For the last time, you can’t—”

“Don’t tell me what I can and can’t do.”

“I’m not gonna let him use you against me, all right?

“I’ve let you handle everything on your own up until now, haven’t I? ’Cause yeah, I’m not much help in a fight against a bunch of ravens, but this is Riddle. We know what to expect going in—”

“That’s not even a little true!”

"More than usual, yeah, we do. But you think I can’t do anything but sit around cooped up here while you and Evans take down this bastard.”

“I know you want to help, but bringing you would be like bringing a knife to a gun fight. You don’t have superpowers! I do, and so does Lily, and I can’t exactly get you powers by tomorrow night.”

“Could you?” Sirius asked Algernon.

Algernon shook his head.

“There, see?” said James. “Look, Lily and I will handle it. I’m sorry. I wish you could help, but what if he did have a gun and you were there and then—I don’t know what I’d do, yeah? If you…” He exhaled. “I’m sorry.”
“Whatever.”

Sirius picked up the Telegraph from his lap, snapped it open in front of his face, and manhandled it into a rectangle with the crossword on top. Algernon fetched a pen from James’s desk and flew it over to Sirius, then settled on Sirius’s shoulder.

James scrubbed a hand through his hair.

Sirius would get over it eventually. His parents would probably say something racist about James by week’s end and Sirius would forget all about not being able to fight Voldemort.

James slid his phone out of his back pocket and found a new text from Lily. As promised, and much to Sirius’s chagrin, James had sent her plenty of puns on his walk home.

How does Black put up with your puns?? Doesn't he basically live with you?

James dropped down onto his mattress, grinning.

Truthfully he’d been grinning in some way or another since Lily had told him everything under the stairwell. Again, it was admittedly weird to be so happy when she was so miserable. But at the same time…

He kept thinking about what might have happened if McGonagall hadn’t interrupted. What he might have said. What Lily might have done.

He should have said something to her in a text, but it seemed out of place to send a message like, i hope i'm doing an okay job comforting you or i want to know all your secrets and hoard them like a dragon.

Instead, he wrote, i don't pun around him. he charges me a fiver per pun. you might even say he punishes me

The dots indicating she was writing activated at once.

Do you ever let up? Like honestly, is this what you’re thinking about all day in class?

i'm punstoppable

If you had punned as yourself I’d have caught on much sooner. Also if you had glasses as Chat. Where do they go?

James snorted.

magic.

Should’ve guessed.

i took a magic class when i was younger, you know

Why am I not surprised

unfortunately i failed the final exam. they were all trick questions

What is wrong with you?? Did your scientist parents feed you brain-altering chemicals as a baby???
James beamed up at Sirius, ready to recount his hilarity, but Sirius had picked up his own phone.

“Looking up clues is cheating,” James told him.

Sirius flipped up two fingers on one hand. “I’m researching Riddle, I’ll have you know. Some of us are actually focused on what matters here.” He glanced up at James, then sent him a look of disgust. “You’re texting her more puns, aren’t you.”

“I’m on fire! I need more people to appreciate it.”

“How much is it going to cost you to tell me them?”

James checked his phone. “Fifteen quid.”

“Christ,” Sirius said, typing something into his phone. “It’s been two minutes.”

“You should be glad I’ve got Lily around now. She appreciates my artistry.”

Sirius rolled his eyes, his thumbs still tapping away. “So after you die from lack of preparation, and also from insufficient back-up, d’you want me to call you a complete dunce in your eulogy, or will hopeless idiot do?”

“Lovestruck fool, if it comes down to it. Cheers.”

James turned his attention back to his phone while Algernon wheezed out a laugh.

*the ladybug doth protest too much*

*Never thought I’d see the day where I’d be this desperate for a distraction. Under other circumstances I would turn off my phone in protest.*

*then let me distract you with some more hiss-terical cat puns*

James had plenty of school work to do and, probably more importantly, some thinking to do about confronting Riddle. It wasn’t like Lily was going to be getting anything done about Riddle tonight, which was totally understandable. She was stuck, like she’d said. Her sister was making her miserable.

What he really should have been doing was working on finding a way for her to get out of that house. But it was hard to think about things other than her exasperated replies to his texts.

He had to put a pause on his puns when his dad called them down for dinner.

James’s mouth watered when his dad set a platter on the table. “Masala dose?”

“You seemed a bit down last night,” Fleamont said.

Euphemia dropped a kiss on the top of James’s head as she passed. “I’m bribing you.”

“If I didn’t have to personally handle the consequences,” Sirius said to James, “I’d tell you to be down more often.”

“No bribing required,” James announced. “All is well. Life is amazing. I’m in a comedy. Pass the rice?”

Euphemia’s eyes lit up. “Did you kiss Lily?”
James had wished countless times for an invisibility cloak. His mum had been the cause every time.

“Don’t encourage him,” Sirius said.

Fleamont pushed the rice across the table. “A gentleman never kisses and tells.”

“Such wisdom.” Sirius nudged James. “Listen to your father.”

“James is a heathen,” Euphemia said, “not a gentlemen.”

James’s mouth dropped open. “Oi!”

“Now make good on this bribe and tell your mum what’s what.”

“They haven’t kissed,” Sirius said flatly. “But she fancies him, and that’s it. There is literally nothing more to say on this subject.”

“Oi!” said James.

“Oi!” said Euphemia.

Fleamont stared down at the untouched plates of food. “Why do I even bother?”

Euphemia at least made a show of picking up her fork. “Did she say she fancies you?”

“I mean, no,” James said, waving a hand, “but that’s not even—it’s super complicated, I promise, but it was good. She’s…” He sighed happily. “I mean she’s bloody miserable, don’t get me wrong. Not about me, about—stuff.”

“So she’s suffering,” Fleamont said, “but you’re happy about it.”

“He’s gone full psychopath,” Sirius said solemnly.

“I’m happy she’s not miserable because of me!”

This was another relief, then, being able to tell his mum something.

Euphemia leveled a look at James. “Why would she be miserable because of you?”

“Oh yes.” Sirius turned to James. “Do tell.”

“It’s, er—”

“Complicated?” Euphemia suggested. “Don’t touch that bribe until you pay up.”

“Ignore her,” Fleamont said. “Eat the dose.”

“In a minute.” She flicked a hand in his direction. “James. What did you do?”

Sirius smugly shoved a piece of dose in his mouth.

“Er,” said James, and why had he told her anything, he was such an idiot. “I may have…unintentionally, that is…look. All you need to know is it wasn’t my fault!”

Euphemia locked eyes with Fleamont. “That’s what men always say.”

Fleamont ignored her and asked Sirius, “Is he lying?”
“Oi!” said James.

“I wish,” said Sirius.

“Good enough.” Euphemia nodded. “Eat up.”

James cheered, somewhat internally and somewhat externally, and tucked in.

Later his parents droned on about something boring like mortgage rates—he didn’t really follow, and didn’t really care—which gave him the chance to think about what truly mattered right then.

Once excused, he sprinted up to his room, ready to entertain Lily with a slew of new puns.

And, somewhat more relevantly, he’d also decided that *i’m worried about you* would be an acceptable message to send. It was simple and to the point and wouldn’t come off as overbearing.

He happened to glance at the *Telegraph* on his way back to his bed. The crossword was mostly empty.

“Not a good puzzle?” he asked Sirius as they resettled into their earlier positions. “I know you know five down.”

“Bit monotonous, doing the crossword every day. Thought planning a deadly struggle for the city might break it up nicely.”

While he spoke, James pulled his silenced phone out of his pocket to see what Lily had written during dinner.

But whatever she’d written was hidden beneath the picture of Peter’s face that popped up.

James held up his pointer finger at Sirius. “Hold on.”

Sirius scoffed. “This isn’t a bloody phone call. You can’t put me on hold.”

“It is a phone call—it’s Peter.” James pressed a button and lifted the phone to his ear. “London’s finest speaking.”

“James,” Peter said breathlessly. “I’ve just seen an akuma—”

“What?” James jumped up from his bed. “At your house?”

“No, I’m at the hotel, said I was working on something so I could keep an eye out—I saw one fly by the window just now!”

“You’re sure it wasn’t a regular moth?” James tried. “One that just looks like it’s been infused with an ethereal evil glow?”

Sirius nearly leaped out of the chair. “What—”

James flapped a hand at him to shut him up.

Algernon darted out from under the bed, eyes wide. He flew up to hang in the air near James’s head.

“—definitely a real one,” Peter was saying. “And Riddle’s in his office, and the appointment’s been moved on his calendar to now—”
“Fuck,” James said, his heartbeat spiking. “Fuck!”

“Tell Lily and get over here! He could take off the Miraculous any second.”

“Yeah, yeah, we’re coming. There in a flash.”

“Different hero,” muttered Sirius.

“Shut up,” said James as he ended the call. “Right. Um. Shit. We’re on tonight. Fuck! Just let me text Lily—”

Sirius grabbed his phone from the armrest. “I’ll fucking tell her—go.”

“Cheers.” James held up a fist, prepared to transform, and then remembered. “I’m sorry,” he said to Sirius. “I wish you could come.”

Algernon gave an impatient meow.

Sirius sent James a neutral look. “Like the cat said: get out of here.”

James swallowed. Not exactly the send-off he’d been hoping for, but it was pretty understandable given the circumstances.

“Right,” he said. “Yeah. On it.” He nodded firmly at Algernon. “Claws out!”

Truthfully, getting picked up by Petunia at Hogwarts could have gone much worse. She was too English to make a scene at school or in the cab. Her tirade came later, at home in the dining room, and was resistant to Lily’s explanation that she’d been getting help from Slughorn on an assignment.

She sent Lily upstairs with just a bacon sandwich for dinner. The joke was on Petunia there, though, because bacon sandwiches were delicious. Leave it to Petunia to forget Lily’s favorites.

Petunia was probably quite pleased with herself downstairs, mulling on Lily alone and miserable up in the attic. But Lily had a bacon sandwich and a phone and texts from Dorcas and James.

She knew she was only encouraging his terrible pun habit by indulging him. And she knew she was playing along with his inanity in part because she couldn’t seem to compose the text she really wanted to send him.

She kept writing different versions and deleting them.

Thanks for earlier.

Thanks for listening.

Sorry I just dumped all my problems on you but also thank you for not being anything but really nice about it and also dear god I hope tonight uses up all of your puns but also please never stop.

And, of course, I wish McGonagall hadn’t shown up.

Misfortune meant that Dorcas got called to dinner not long after James did, leaving Lily alone with Mary.

It was talk to her or do schoolwork. Which was really no choice at all.
“Chat seems to be keeping you chipper,” Mary said, hovering overhead.

“Don’t you dare tell him I laughed so much at those awful puns,” Lily said, lying flat on her bed, one hand propped beneath her neck. “And don’t say you told me so about telling him things.”

“I won’t.” Mary clasped her miniature fingers together. “I will say I’m proud of you, though.”

“That seems a bit premature—we haven’t got Riddle yet.”

“You trusted James. That was brave.”

“I put my life on the line all the time, and that’s what you think qualifies as brave?”

“Bravery comes in different forms.”

“Well, the city needs more of one type than the others.”

“It’s not the city I’m worried about.”

Lily tipped her head to the side, looking at the slanting wall of the attic roof. She couldn’t speak at first, not around the lump in her throat.

At last, she said, still in slight disbelief, “He wasn’t even fazed.”

“And it felt good telling him, didn’t it?”

*Good* fell shorter than any of her deleted drafts did. *Good* was getting positive comments on her essays. *Good* was slamming her trapdoor shut, even though it wasn’t exactly in Petunia’s face.

Telling James everything was…

She smiled a little. “Brilliant,” she said, quietly and to herself.

The best version of Ladybug, the one Lily wasn’t, would have been plotting out the attack on Riddle just now. But what there was left to plan or discuss, Lily didn’t know. She couldn’t glean any new information at this point. She had no way to gather additional insight—

Only.

Her stomach clenched.

She looked up at Mary. “D’you think Severus knows?” she asked. “That Riddle’s Voldemort?”

Mary stopped smiling. “Oh, no. I hadn’t thought about that.”

“I can’t believe I didn’t—I should’ve thought of it once Peter realized—Sev’s even closer to Riddle than Peter is.”

“But Peter didn’t know.”

“No.” Lily frowned. “He didn’t. And Riddle…I can’t imagine why he’d tell Severus. I mean we’re just teenagers, so it’s not like he would trust us—only Sev does run that blog, and *sh*it—”

Her phone vibrated on her duvet beside her, bleating out her ringtone.

A picture of Black holding up his middle finger and looking annoyed graced the screen.
She sat up and pressed the speakerphone button. “Hello?”

“Pete’s just seen an akuma at the hotel.”

Mary inhaled sharply.

“But it’s too early!” Lily said. “It’s only been a day and a half.”

“Then go tell Riddle that yourself and maybe he’ll undo it. Just get over there, yeah?”

“Where’s—”

“He’s just left. Now go.”

His picture disappeared, returning her phone to its lock screen.

Lily scrambled off the bed and stood up as much as she could in the center of her room. “Mary, it’s too soon! We’re not ready—why did I just read puns for the last few hours—”

“It’s okay. You’ll figure it out—you said so, right?”

“Yeah, but—shit. Shit!” She shoved her phone in her jeans pocket. “Mary,” she said, “spots—”

“Wait!” Mary flew forward, holding up her hands. “You have to get outside first.”

“Shit, right. Come on, then.”

Lily flung open the trap door and nearly leaped down the ladder, but then stopped herself.

She’d assumed she would have to make a defiant blaze of glory on her way out. If Vernon and Petunia were watching telly, though, she might sneak behind their backs. They might never know Lily had left. If she came back after dark, she might just go unnoticed.

But of course that was a fool’s dream.

The second she appeared on the stairs, Vernon demanded, “What’re you doing?”

He was sitting on the sofa with their tablet on his lap, the familiar colors of a horrible, ultra conservative news site on its screen.

“Er,” said Lily. “Where’s Petunia?”

“Out doing the shopping. Working, unlike some people around here.”

Lily could have strangled him. It literally made no sense and he was so damned thick and she didn’t have time for this—

“That’s fine.” She marched down a step. “I’m leaving.”

“You’re ruddy grounded.”

“You’re a ruddy menace to society, and yet people let you leave the front door every day. It’s a mystery to us all.”

He set aside the tablet and began the effort of climbing to his feet. “Now see here—”

“Can’t, you’re blocking the view.” She raced down the rest of the stairs and grabbed the doorknob.
“I’ll be home later!”

“Don’t,” he shouted after her, “bother!”

She flew down the street, her feet lighter than they’d ever felt, her lungs heaving steadily. Mary transformed her behind a nearby restaurant—not the most glamorous spot, but there was no time for glamour right now.

Swinging across London had never seemed so terribly slow before tonight. James would’ve arrived at the hotel within minutes, but she had much more ground to cover. There were no shortcuts to be made. It would simply take as long as it took.

Why couldn’t Riddle stick to his own damn plans?

She found Chat on the building across the street from the hotel, tucked in the shadows of a chimney. The sun’s last rays were stubbornly fighting against the horizon in the distance.

His lips naturally curled into a smile when she landed. Never mind that they were caught off guard and about to battle evil. He was just that much of an insensible idiot.

But it wasn’t like she could keep a return smile off her face, either, so they were truly a matched set.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hey,” he said. “You made your big escape.”

“Petunia wasn’t even home. Which was a bit weird, honestly, since she tries to stay in after dark, but I must’ve made her so angry she couldn’t stand to be there. Not that she’d’ve stopped me from leaving tonight.”

His hand came up to run through his hair, his mouth at an uncertain slant. “We’re gonna figure it out, you know? Later. What to do about you and her and—and all of that.”

Night hadn’t won over nearly enough to hide Lily’s blush. “James, don’t—we’ve got to focus.”

“No, but like—I promise, we’re gonna—”

“I know,” she said. “I know, just don’t—I don’t want to think about her right now.”

“But later? We’ll talk—I should’ve texted something about it, I’m sorry, I didn’t know what to—”

“No! No, you’re not—I wanted to—it wasn’t…I just blathered on at school. And you—”

“—liked it. Please, it wasn’t blathering—I want to know—”

“I know—I mean I didn’t, but I…worry about me later.” She curled the end of her ponytail around her finger and tugged. “There’s so many other things to worry about right now.”

“But you’re the one I care about the most.”

He said it so earnestly, bordering on confused, like it went without even saying—

She threw herself forward. Her hand found the back of his neck and drew his mouth to hers.

Rooftop kisses were apparently going to be A Thing for them.
But this wasn’t like their last one. This one was sliding heat and his hand on her hip and her heartbeat thrumming so steadily next to his. This one was pressing Chat back up against the chimney and finally showing that damned smart mouth of his exactly what it should be doing instead of forming puns all the time.

This one was, she remembered, very poorly timed.

She stopped kissing him, but couldn’t immediately summon the strength to unmeld her body from where it had lined up against his.

“Riddle,” she said, their faces still nearly touching.

“Not who I was thinking about,” he said in a daze, “but honestly at this point whatever works for you.”

“No, you—we have to go arrest him. Or whatever.” She forcibly and reluctantly extricated herself from his embrace. “Shit, we should’ve got handcuffs for him.”

“No pockets.”

“Right.”

She shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts.

Riddle. They were catching Riddle. They were going to go into the hotel and pin him down and rip that bloody Miraculous off of him.

Somehow.

They’d discussed so many strategy options earlier, but she’d just emptied them all from her brain.

“Sorry,” she said.

“That you stopped?” James was still flat against the chimney, breathing heavily. “Yeah. Me too.”

“James.”

“I’ll be okay in a second. Promise.”

“We had a plan,” Lily said distantly. “Didn’t we?”

“No. We decidedly did not.”

“Oh right. Right.” Lily took in the grid of hotel windows, all golden behind pale, drawn curtains. “You were scoping things out earlier, yeah? What’d you see?”

“Nothing of interest. The doorman took a hit of a joint when no one was watching.”

“What! He said he was going to quit—right. Doesn’t matter.” Lily scanned the rooftops around them. “Doesn’t seem like the akuma’s landed anywhere near here. I can’t hear any screams.”

“I figure we’ll worry about the akuma later.” He pushed himself away from the chimney. “I think when you got here, I was sitting here thinking about how to get in his office.”

“Right. We talked about going in through the rooftop door.” Lily kept looking at the hotel, only because she did not trust herself to look at Chat’s kissed-red lips right now. “But I’m also thinking,
standing here now, that I kind of want to break something of his.”

“I hope you’re thinking window. Because I’m thinking window.”

She couldn’t not look at him now. “Why yes,” she said with a grin. “That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

Peter had drawn out a map of Riddle’s office earlier. By her recollection, the second window from the right would be safe enough to enter. A thin line of light ran down the small gap between the curtains.

Riddle was in there. Voldemort was in there, using his Miraculous for evil for the last time.

“We really should’ve had more of a plan,” she said.

“Nah,” he said. “Not with you around.”

She couldn’t feel his body heat, not with their supersuits in between, but there was still something about being so close to James that made her skin keenly aware of the small gap between them.

“Save your flattery,” she said. “I’m not kissing you right now.”

“Soos suspicious. Like I can’t say nice things without an ulterior motive.”

“You’ve always got an ulterior motive—you’re usually—” Her smile dropped. “Oh no,” she said. “Don’t.”

He was looking much too pleased with himself. He was really going to do it now, of all times.

“If you’d let me finish,” he said, “I was going to say luck be a Ladybug tonight—”

“I can’t take this,” she said, and grabbed her yo-yo off her hip.

She cast it toward the hotel, caught it on a chimney, and swung forward.

Cool air rushed over her as she flew. It wasn’t far at all—just a short hop across a narrow city street.

She pressed her legs together, brought her arms up to shield her face, and aimed the balls of her feet at the gap in the curtains.

The glass shattered with a burst of sharp tinkling. Shards scraped over the sides of her neck. The curtains trailed along her body.

Her feet thudded as they connected with the wood floors. She slid for several feet, flinging her arms out for balance, and came to a stop in beside his desk.

“Must you always be so dramatic?” Voldemort said.

He was not alone.

Four other figures shared the room with him. Three stood with him near the antique chairs at one end of the office. They all wore severe black cloaks, giving the impression in the dark-wood-paneled office of three floating white faces.

One figure sat tied to a chair.
The first standing face belonged to the smarmy bastard Lucius Malfoy, which came as no surprise. Severus stood next to him, and her heart failed for a moment—he knew, he knew, that traitorous bastard—but even that she had to momentarily ignore. The next face, unfamiliar but smirking and horrid, had a neck the width of a tree trunk, and arms like trusses. At the end of one of those arms he held a narrow, shining knife, the edge poised a hairsbreadth from the front of a long, pale neck.

Petunia screamed behind her gag.
Chapter 16

Lily’s mind had tuned to an empty radio station, the sheer static crowding out any space for coherent thought.

Chat came flying in through the broken window, unintentionally ripping down one the curtains with his legs, and landed by dropping into a somersault. He tumbled over broken glass with his hands tucked behind his neck, then he launched up into a fighting pose just at Lily’s side.

But it did not matter. Thick rope still bound Petunia’s chest and ankles to the wingback chair, and her wrists to her thighs. Her ear nearly grazed her shoulder as her head tried to pull away from the knife.

Lily couldn’t fight, Chat couldn’t fight, not while that blade still glinted so near to Petunia’s throat. They had not planned for this. They had not planned for not being able to act—

“Welcome,” said Voldemort.

Unlike his garishly-attired victims, the Moth Miraculous outfitted Voldemort in a sharp, dark violet suit with black, wing-like lapels. A sleek silver mask blanketed most of his head, save for two spaces around his eyes, and another around his mouth and chin. And there, nestled just under the base of his throat, sat a brooch of a large, white set of wings.

The Moth Miraculous, at last.

“Ladybug and Chat Noir,” he said, enunciating clearly. He carried a matching purple walking stick in his hand. “I do hope you’ve derived as much enjoyment as I have from the last eight months. I admit—”

“Ladybug,” Chat whispered from her side, “d’you know who—”

“Impatient children,” Voldemort chided. “This is why Lord Voldemort shall succeed—his patience always brings him what he desires.”

Lily’s tongue twitched with a comment. She reined it in like she did every day at school, and it tasted just as bitter.

“Lord Voldemort,” Chat said scathingly, and Lily’s lungs stopped working because he didn’t know, and he wasn’t good at shutting up, “should learn what a prick he sounds like when he refers to himself in the third person.”

“Yaxley,” Voldemort said idly.

Petunia tried to pull her head even further away from Yaxley, her eyes wide and panicked, but even her long neck could only stretch so far.

With practiced swiftness, Yaxley nicked the knife against her skin.

She shrieked.

The muffled sound reverberated inside of Lily’s painfully empty head. Every muscle clenched as she restrained herself from leaping forward at once.

She had to do something, she had to act, but she couldn’t she couldn’t she couldn’t.
A drop of dark blood slid down Petunia’s throat.

“If you are under the impression,” Voldemort said, “that I arranged for your presence in order to suffer through your incessant chatter, you are sorely mistaken.”

Lily managed to tear her eyes away from Voldemort and Petunia just long enough to send Chat a warning look. He responded with a small nod.

“As I was saying,” Voldemort took up a leisurely pacing in front of his silent followers, his walking stick clacking against the hardwood floor. “Eight months have passed relatively quickly, have they not? I admit, I had at first intended to more actively pursue the Ladybug and Cat Miraculouses eight months ago. For years, I had pored through research to learn more about their fantastic powers, and to discover their whereabouts. I doubt you are aware, ignorant as you are about nearly everything, but the two most powerful Miraculouses have never been simultaneously wielded by one person. All the wielders have always been too afraid to do so, too afraid of their vast, rumored power.” He paused. “The fools.”

Dorcas had been so right. Leverage was everything. Lily could hardly breathe without panicking that the knife would sink right into Petunia’s throat.

What good were magically-enhanced muscles and weapons if she couldn’t use them?

Voldemort resumed his pacing. “The Ladybug and Cat Miraculouses are, perhaps, the most heavily guarded of the Miraculouses. Years of research confirmed what I had initially suspected: the Guardian only assigns them in times of dire need. How better to draw them out, then, than to create the direst of situations? The Moth Miraculous fell out of the Guardian’s hands some years ago, and with my vastly superior skills, I acquired it. I mastered it. I intended to discard it as soon as I acquired the true power I sought…and then you two appeared.”

His thin, pale lips curved up at one end.

“Now see the way that fate favors Lord Voldemort. My diligence rewarded me with the revelation of your true identities, and our ongoing saga has inspired countless numbers to flock to my cause, a feat for which I feel that I almost owe you thanks.”

Bile burned against the back of Lily’s throat. But she didn’t need bile, she needed a plan, and yet her thoughts all scattered the instant she tried to force them together.

“I find, though, that I’ve grown tired of our little game,” he said. “And fate has bestowed upon me the perfect confluence of events that has brought us here. To you, and me, and my faithful followers…and your sister, Ladybug.”

Chat sucked in a sharp breath.

Voldemort strolled over to Petunia to smear his finger through the track of blood. He examined his gloved finger and then rubbed it against his thumb.

He turned toward Lily and Chat. “Tiresome as it is to repeat myself anew, I find the situation rather calls for it. I’m content that this should, at least, serve as the final refrain.” He held out a hand, palm up. “Give me your Miraculouses.”

Lily forced her throat to swallow. “And you’ll let her go?”

“Once I have acquired both Miraculouses, she is of no use to me, and may return home safely.”
“Brilliant,” Chat said. “We give up our power and you’re going to let us all go, is that right? After all the shit we’ve gone through this year because of you, we’re supposed to believe you’ll just wave goodbye as we walk away, leaving you with three Miraculouses?”

Voldemort raised an eyebrow, weirdly visible beneath the skintight mask. “Lord Voldemort is a man of his word.”

“You’ve no choice,” said Severus.

Lily had been trying to ignore the deep stab of betrayal in her chest. It mattered little against the petrifying terror about her sister, but it throbbed persistently all the same.

At a quelling look from Voldemort, Severus pressed his mouth shut.

There would be no surprise assistance from him. Lily and Chat were on their own. Turn in their Miraculouses, or lose her one remaining family member.

Petunia had been nothing but awful since their parents had died, and honestly somewhat awful even before then. She was snobbish and entitled and prissy and cruel. She’d never got over their parents’ deaths and had never once asked Lily how she was doing afterwards and had basically cut off any good emotion toward Lily from that moment on.

For more than two years, Lily had been suffering doubly: the loss of her parents, and the rejection of her only sister.

Which didn’t even touch on all the awfulness within the past month, the frenzied control of where Lily was at any given moment, the mad overprotectiveness—

Because here and now, Lily could admit that it was protectiveness. A deranged version, yes, but Petunia had to have some shred of concern left for Lily. If she didn’t, she wouldn’t have cared if Lily was safe from villains. She would have let Lily go live with someone else while she and Vernon moved away. It made no sense for her to lock Lily up or drag her down to Sussex if she genuinely didn’t care on some incredibly remote level.

Their whole lives, Petunia had been telling Lily not to swing so high, not to jump from trees, not to cross the street without holding someone’s hand. She cared, yes—she’d always just been terribly rude about it.

Dorcas had encouraged Lily and James to be willing to do anything to win. To be willing to threaten Tom Riddle’s life, so he would be afraid.

But Lily did not have that in her. Even if events had transpired differently, Tom Riddle would never have been afraid that they would kill him.

There was no question, though, whether Voldemort would actually kill Petunia.

There was no choice for Lily at all.

Ladybug had been ghost-white from the moment James had tumbled into Voldemort’s office. He should have guessed it was her sister in that chair—Petunia had the same slope to her nose as Lily, and the same almond-shaped eyes.

Something had gone terribly wrong here, beginning with the point at which Voldemort had learned Lily’s identity. And, very likely, James’s.
Because he had to know. Peter had almost definitely seen an akuma by the hotel earlier, but Voldemort must have seen Peter around. He knew Peter was James’s friend. And god, that was why Peter had got the job in the first place, wasn’t it? Riddle had offered him the assistant position just after noticing James’s ring…

Fuck. James and Lily and the others had spent sixty minutes planning this attack, but Riddle had been planning it for months.

Riddle had found out their identities. He’d kidnapped Lily’s sister. He’d successfully lured them here unprepared, and had the ultimate leverage in front of him.

But little did Riddle know how awful this awful blonde devil was, this bitch who’d made Lily’s life hell. Who’d locked Lily in her room and screwed the bloody window shut. Who Lily had once said would sell her Miraculous if she found out Lily was Ladybug.

For all that Petunia was a maniacal cow, though…she was still Lily’s sister. That had to be worth quite a bit. James wouldn’t know, exactly, since he’d got to choose his effective brother. But Lily clearly hadn’t given up on saving her, or she’d have attacked already.

All the glances he could sneak at Lily didn’t glean any further information about what she was thinking, about what she wanted to do, about what he should be doing in turn. Was she already plotting an attack on Voldemort in her head? Deciding which followers she’d rely on James to take care of while she went for the brooch? Was she at all considering sacrificing Petunia, and risking Tom Riddle figuring out what, exactly, “ultimate power” meant?

If Petunia hadn’t been so horrendous, it might have been easier to judge what Lily might do. If James knew more about Lily—

And that was the crux of the issue, wasn’t it? Eight months of watching her, of listening in, of reading her interviews did not make him an expert. He knew that she liked pistachio cake, and that she had very smart remarks for anyone who asked if lilies were her favorite flower, and that she would always stand up for what she believed in.

But what did she believe in here? Ladybug had never been willing to sacrifice civilians in previous fights, but she’d never had someone who’d ruined her life on the line before.

“You mistakenly believe,” Voldemort said, “that my patience has no bounds. I see, even now, the gears shifting in your minds, eager to persuade yourselves that there is an alternate course of action. Rest assured: there is not.”

Ladybug still hadn’t given up her earrings. James could see the rapid rise and fall of her chest, though, and could hear her short breaths. Had she not made up her mind? Was she waiting for James to do something?

All he knew how to do was stall.

“Some genius you are,” James said. “Big deal, you saw my ring that day at the hotel. I came to you. It’s not like you had to do any work to find us.”

“I, who have gone further than anybody along the path to true power, would have located you regardless of whether your arrogance and immaturity brought you to my attention. My faithful servants merely had to use modern technology to discover your identities—”

“Faithful servants—who, Snape?” James said. “Yeah he’s got drones, but I’m not sure that’s worth ultimate power, to be honest, getting all that grease tracked through your hotel.”
Happily, that earned a clenched jaw out of Snape.

James might have been out of practice at Insult Snape, but some things were like riding a bike.

Voldemort said, “Your attempt to delay the inevitable leaves much to be desired.”

“Yeah, well, if you kill Petunia before we hand over our Miraculouses, there’s no real reason for us to give in, is there?”

“Yaxley is perfectly willing to commit acts shy of murder,” Voldemort said. “In fact, I daresay he might prefer them.”

Yaxley lowered the knife to Petunia’s collarbone, which lay exposed by the wide neck of her shirt.

Something crashed behind James.

He risked the glance, knowing Ladybug would keep her eyes on Voldemort.

Then James laughed, mostly out of shock.

Sirius had kicked the office door down. He stood on top of it, hands raised, palms and fingers wrapped tightly around the handle of a gun.

He fired at once.

James flinched from the noise, and the strangled cry that followed.

He whipped around to look at Voldemort.

But it was Yaxley who’d sunk to one knee next to Petunia. The knife clattered to the floor as he clutched at his bleeding thigh with both hands, his cloak pooling around him.

Ladybug’s yo-yo shot toward the knife at the same second that Malfoy dove for it. Her yo-yo landed first, knocking it under Petunia’s chair.

James immediately stopped caring about the knife. Lily would take care of it and Petunia, and he didn’t have to worry about Sirius because he inexplicably had a bloody gun.

James launched himself toward Voldemort.

Snape, the coward, ducked behind the empty chair, reaching for something in his cloak pocket. If he was a threat, he wasn’t an immediate one.

James grabbed his staff and extended it while he ran. As he closed in, he raised it above his head and swung down. At the same time, Voldemort yanked up his walking stick with both hands, crashing it against James’s staff. Their weapons locked overhead.

James could have used Cataclysm to destroy the walking stick, but then he’d only have five minutes until he detransformed, and this fight could easily take longer. Not to mention he still had to go fight the akuma out there waiting for them when this was done.

Special powers were out, then, which just left cleverness.

James’s mouth slanted into a sharp smile, and clicked the button to shorten his staff.

With a sudden lack of barrier, Voldemort’s arms shoved upright.
James kneed him in the gut. Voldemort grunted and stumbled back two steps, his leg nearly running into the empty chair.

Sirius had wanted James to kill Riddle, but that was asking too much. All James could do now was give Sirius and Lily enough time to free Petunia before they all bailed.

If that meant James got to beat up on Riddle for a while, well. That was perfectly fine by him.

Malfoy shifted, starting to reach under the chair for the knife, but Lily flung her yo-yo toward his hand. It wrapped neatly around his wrist, stopping his movement at once.

He swore.

“Try ignoring me now,” she said.

A sharp yank brought him staggering out of his crouch toward her.

Black rushed up to her side, his gun aimed directly at Malfoy’s chest.

“I’ve got this,” he said without looking at her. “Get her out of here.”

She pulled her yo-yo back to her palm. “Cheers.”

Malfoy’s hands inched toward the ceiling in surrender, an infuriated scowl marring his features.

“No, please,” Black told him. “Give me an excuse.”

He gestured for Malfoy to step away from Petunia, toward the nearby tea cart. Malfoy obeyed, his eyes narrowed.

Tempting as it was to further revel in Malfoy’s defeat, gloating would have to wait.

Lily rushed forward and sank to her knees beside Petunia, opposite the still-sobbing Yaxley, who was pressing his cloak into his wound. Somehow his bellowing seemed very, very distant.

She swiped the knife from under the chair and, after a quick check on Chat, got to work.

She sawed into the rope tying one of Petunia’s wrists to her thigh, just above her knee. They’d had to hike her skirt up a little to manage. It had clearly wrinkled. Petunia would be furious.

The thumping of Lily’s heart almost drowned out the harsh noises of the fight behind her: the slaps of their supersuited feet on wood, the panting breaths as they darted around, the ringing clang of Chat’s staff connecting with Voldemort’s stick.

She kept glancing over to make sure Chat was holding off Voldemort well enough, but she needn’t have worried. He was, as always, providing excellent cover.

The blade sliced through the remaining fibers, letting the rope flop away, and revealing an angry red welt in a ring around Petunia’s thigh.

Bastards.

While Lily scooted sideways to start on the other wrist, Petunia used her free hand to rip the gag out of her mouth.
“How 

could you,” she hissed, the gag still tied and hanging around her neck.

“Free you?” Lily said tersely. “Sorry, I didn’t realize rope was the latest hot accessory.”

“Get involved in all of—this.”

“What are we really going to do this now?” Lily snapped. “I’m kind of in the middle of something.”

The second rope gave way.

Petunia crossed her now-freed arms. “All these months,” she said, “you were running out of my house for this—this freak show.”

Lily ground her teeth together and focused on cutting Petunia’s ankle free. She could “accidentally” nick Petunia, but that would probably only delay things as Petunia verbally ripped into her over it.

Petunia went on, “And you hesitated—he was going to kill me and you hesitated—”

Lily paused in her sawing. “Shut up, Petunia, or so help me I will leave you tied to this bloody chair.”

Petunia harrumphed, but blissfully said nothing more.

Thirty seconds passed before Lily finished her job, seconds in which a glance revealed Voldemort’s walking stick nearly smashing into Chat’s face, only for Chat to flip out of its path out of the last moment. That close call aside, Chat was doing well—he’d forced Voldemort to retreat, moving them back toward the broken window, almost to Riddle’s desk.

They might win this after all.

The last rope fell.

“There.” Lily jumped to both feet and slid the knife to land near Black’s shoes. “Now get out.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.” Petunia stood up and smoothed out her skirt. “When you get home—”

“Oh my god, go!”

Lily shoved her toward the door, but Petunia had barely moved out of reach when Lily heard a familiar buzzing noise.

“Severus,” she said, without intending to.

His prize drone soared in through the broken window above Voldemort, shattering a few remaining glass pieces along the edge with its four whirling blades.

“Run!” Lily shouted at Petunia, who had naturally turned completely immobile.

Lily rushed forward and shoved with one hand, while her other reached for her yo-yo. Thankfully the push worked—Petunia began sprinting toward the door as fast as her skirt and clacking heels would allow.

Lily stepped forward, prepared to fight off the drone and allow Petunia safe passage.

But the drone didn’t follow Petunia.
It headed straight for Chat.

Severus had stood up behind one of the wingback chairs, his phone in his hand. Lily could try to tackle him to wrestle away the phone and its drone-controlling app, but while she did that, Chat would still have to dodge the drone, leaving Voldemort unopposed.

She couldn’t go for Sev. Not yet.

While Lily bound toward Chat and Voldemort, she checked to see if Petunia had lingered.

She hadn’t.

At least Petunia was safe. Now Lily and Chat and Black just had to get out of here in one piece. Ideally with the Miraculous, but she would take alive and well at this point.

She didn’t shoot for the drone. For one thing, there was no way Sev would sic it on her. For another, an unbreakable string could still easily get caught up in the blades. Chat’s staff was much better suited to destroying the drone before it could slice into one of them.

Chat had naturally made the same assessment. Still holding his staff, he completed a one-handed back handspring away from Voldemort.

Within seconds she stepped into his place, yo-yo whipping in a circle at her side.

Voldemort sent her a smug raise of the eyebrow. A challenge.

This fucking bastard.

She was going to take him down.

She shot her yo-yo forward, intending to wrap it around his ankles and then pull him off his feet.

Just as it verged on reaching him, he crashed his walking stick down into the yo-yo’s path. Instead of confining his legs, the yo-yo twined itself around metal. He promptly jerked the stick up with one hand, while the other clenched the yo-yo in place.

The smirk on his face was intolerable.

Chat made a frustrated noise nearby. She heard the whiff of his staff against air, but no clang against flying metal yet.

It didn’t matter. Lily was about to end this for good.

She charged full tilt toward Voldemort, shrinking the length of the yo-yo string as she moved. He thought he was so clever, catching her yo-yo, but she’d just force that pretentious walking stick right out of his bloody hands, and then possibly up his arse.

Someone beside her got punched in the face. There was a distinctive sound to it: the smack against skin, the hollow noise in the mouth, and the subsequent thump as someone collapsed onto the ground.

She let her attention drift sideways, only for a moment, just to confirm the obvious.

And yes, it was Severus down on the ground. Excellent. He deserved it.

She focused back on Voldemort.
In the second she’d looked away, he’d grabbed hold of the taut string and wrapped it once around his palm.

He heaved on the line with his superhuman strength.

Lily stumbled forward a step. She sank down to one knee for just a moment, but kept her momentum moving toward Voldemort, trying to get back up on her feet. She was so close now. She could grab that bloody brooch in seconds, his stupid games be damned.

His yo-yo-wrapped hand slid up the stick to wrap around the knob on top. He pulled it free from the stick—pulled a knife free, fuck.

Lily was too close now. She couldn’t just stop her momentum. She was tethered to him, and Voldemort’s knife was pointed straight at her—

A black blur hurled itself sideways in front of her, catching against the taut yo-yo string and inadvertently tugging Lily closer.

Her chest shoved Chat up against Voldemort as they all stumbled together.

Faintly, beneath the continuing buzz of the drone, there was a sharp, metallic shik.

A soft, surprised sound fell out of James’s mouth.

His staff clanged as it dropped onto the floor.

Lily couldn’t see where the blade had entered, but she could see how James’s body immediately hunched up on itself, his exposed neck tense and bent forward.

She’d thought her mind had gone blank before with Petunia, but she hadn’t known what the word blank meant, not until now, when sheer nothingness stretched white and eternal across her brain.

The first word that eventually punched through the blankness was No.

Followed by NO!

And then, I can fix this.

Her tethered hand gripped James’s armpit to hold him up as he started to droop, while her other hand reached over his shoulder. After a second of groping, her fingers scrabbled around the clean edges of the Moth Miraculous brooch.

She yanked.

Voldemort’s mask, costume, and walking stick all vanished in an instant.

He cried out in fury.

Lily barely noticed. Her hands were now very full with her returned yo-yo, the brooch, and James’s armpits.

He leaned back into her while letting out a breathless string of profanity, punctuated by a few yelps as she started to help him down to the floor.

His unmasked face a snarling mess, Riddle snatched at Chat’s hand, trying to claw the Cat Miraculous off. James’s fist stayed firmly clenched, though, while his other hand feebly tried to fend
Riddle off.

She lowered James the rest of the way onto the floor. He lay there on top of his staff, gasping for breath, face twisted in agony. Blood seeped out of a gash just under the right side of his ribs.

Riddle was on his knees now, still fighting James’s hand.

Lily pushed herself to her feet.

She didn’t want to. She wanted to check James’s wound and call an ambulance and then shove the Moth Miraculous down Riddle’s throat until he choked.

But Lily had to capture Riddle, had to find the akuma, had to beat it alone, had to set the world back to rights so James’s wound would disappear.

Her yo-yo was safely back in her hand.

She’d never wished the Miraculous gave her a more violent weapon. Not until now.

“Get away from him,” she said, her voice deathly cold, her yo-yo raised and ready to fly. The edges of the Moth Miraculous dug into her other palm.

Riddle’s eyes flicked behind her.

He stood up smoothly, rising to his full height. His hair was just a tad mussed. He swept a hand over it, tucking strands back into place, and said, “You’ve miscalculated.”

Yaxley was down, Malfoy was pinned by Sirius’s aim, and Severus was—

Lily didn’t have to look. The drone, which had been hovering in place after the punch, buzzed with motion once more.

She couldn’t turn her back on Riddle, but the humming only grew louder.

She dropped down to grab the half of Chat’s staff sticking out from beneath his back. She whispered an apology to him as she awkwardly wriggled it free, using the same hand that still held the brooch.

He groaned, pressing his fists over his wound.

She swallowed the heartbroken noise threatening to escape her and shot upright, but it didn’t matter, she hadn’t been quick enough. She’d spent plenty of time with Severus and his bloody drones and she knew it was too loud already, that it was going to run straight into her head, and how could Severus—

But it sailed straight over her.

It sailed over Riddle, too, and then out through the broken window.

“Snape,” Riddle said. “Cease this foolishness and send it at her this instant.”

The drone zoomed back in through the broken window, the motor buzzing as loudly as she’d ever heard it.

Lily frowned. It was too low—Sev must have misjudged—

The drone crashed into the back of Riddle’s skull.
He staggered forward a step, his face jerking down, his mouth making a small, pitiful noise. The whipping front blades splattered tiny drops of blood in the air as the drone retreated.

Riddle’s hands came up to press against the back of his head.

“Severus,” he said, vaguely stunned.

Lily risked a glance back at Severus, who still had his phone clutched in his hands. His mouth had twisted into a vicious scowl, his eyes narrowed to slits.

With a few taps from Severus’s fingers, the drone flew around to Riddle’s front. It barely hovered there for a moment before it began inching closer toward Riddle’s face.

“Snape,” Malfoy called, “cease this at once!”

“Don’t you fucking move!” Black shouted back.

Severus said to Riddle, “You would have killed her.”

Riddle raised his blood-stained hands in front of him. Stupid move—his fingers wouldn’t be a match for the whirring quadruple blades of the drone.

He took a step back. Then another. And another.

His next step found only air.

His body tipped backwards. His mouth formed a surprised O as gravity pulled him out of sight.

“My lord!” shouted Malfoy.

Within seconds, Lily heard a distant, sickening crunch.

It had happened so quickly.

It was done so quickly. So smoothly. So—so finally.

And there were a million things to take in here, about Severus’s choice and Yaxley’s quiet moaning and Malfoy’s shouting, but none of that mattered right now.

Lily sank to her knees.

“James,” she said, cold horror finally creeping in. “Oh, god, I’m so sorry, I’m so—I’ll be right back, promise, but I’ve got to go beat the akuma, just hold on for me to finish it—”

“There is no akuma,” Severus said. He’d moved to stand in front of the window, staring down, his back to Lily. “It was a ruse.”

“No,” Lily said. “Shit. Shit.”

This was not how their fights ended. This was not how all of this ended, not like this, not with James —

She had no idea how bad his injury was. She’d never had to gauge the severity of wounds before, but even she knew that sharp blades shoved into delicate, unprotected parts of bodies couldn’t be good.
Sirius was already on his phone shouting at the emergency operators.

Lily just had to take care of things until then, and why had she never studied up on first aid, why had she always leaned on her post-akuma magic to take care of everything—

Gauze. Fabric. He needed something, and this suit was useless. She detransformed, for once grateful for her everyday clothes.

Mary was saying words to her, but they passed straight through Lily’s ears unheard.

Lily tugged off her cardigan, stuffed it into a ball, and placed it on top of his fists.

“Here,” she said. “It’ll work better than your hands.”

His ribs weren’t lifting properly with each breath—his right lung wasn’t filling, but at least it had been his right side, and not his heart.

He took the cardigan with a grimace and pressed it into his wound.

Sirens wailed nearby.

“Just focus on me,” she told him. “Just keep breathing, yeah? I know it hurts, James, but you’ve got to keep breathing—”

“Can’t,” he wheezed. “You’re taking my breath away.”

“Ohmygod,” Lily said, smoothing his hair away from his forehead. “You idiot, at least save your breath for something original.”

He detransformed before emergency services rushed into the room. Lily couldn’t later recall exactly what she said to them—something frantic and hysterical, no doubt—but it didn’t matter.

What she did remember was the way his blood soaked into her white cardigan. The deep imprint that James’s teeth made on his bottom lip as the paramedics first touched his wound. How surreal it all felt, after months of never having to deal with a serious injury.

She remembered Malfoy pointing a finger. The police handcuffing an oddly silent Severus. The medics tucking James and Yaxley into separate ambulances. Sirius’s hand on her shoulder.

At least until the police arrested Sirius, too, for shooting Yaxley.

She remembered Dorcas, inexplicably there in the crowd of eager onlookers and journalists, next to a pale Peter and a stricken Remus. The clean white sheet covering Riddle’s body nearby, surrounded by a battalion of police officers. The spinning flash of red and blue lights reflected in the windows of the hotel.

She placed her hand over her purse, which held the Moth Miraculous, Mary, and now James’s kwami too.

They’d won.

It had taken months, and a team of effort, and James throwing himself in front of her again. But they’d won.

If only, she thought, it felt like it.
Chapter 17

No matter how much Lily argued, the damn police wouldn’t let her climb into the ambulance with James. They insisted she stay right there to answer their ruddy questions. Even if she hadn’t started panicking that moment because what the hell would she say, their callousness about separating her from her partner clawed at her insides.

She leveled a steady look at them, lifted her chin, and explained very clearly that she wouldn’t be talking without a solicitor present. And, just to make things more difficult for them, her guardian. That bought Lily some time to think of a story.

Her mental reprieve was short-lived, though, because the officers moved onto bothering Malfoy instead. Shit. What if he revealed Ladybug’s and Chat Noir’s true names?

She really had to get out of here. She had to talk to James. She had to figure out what to do.

She should’ve been in the ambulance with him, should’ve been holding his hand, should’ve been comforting him on a careening ride through winding city streets.

Fuck this. She wasn’t staying at this cursed hotel a moment longer.

She locked eyes with Dorcas in the crowd, gave a subtle nod, and then told the officer nearest her she had to go to the loo. From there, it was a matter of minutes until she slid out a side entrance of the hotel and launched herself into Dorcas’s arms for the tightest hug of her life.

Escape was easy enough, but nothing after it was. Not sitting still in the cab while every second crawled by, or scrubbing the blood off her hands, or telling Dorcas what had happened in Riddle’s office.

As it turned out, some of it didn’t need explaining.

“I know,” Dorcas said. They’d found seats in a corner of the waiting room, sufficiently far away from other, distracted people, but they still spoke in low voices. “Lupin was on the rooftop across the street with binoculars watching you through the window. He kept me and Black and Pettigrew updated on the phone. We were just going to cover the entrances in case anyone tried to run away, but then he saw Petunia and told Black to go upstairs.” She smiled grimly. “Then the police showed up and I had to hide my cricket bat behind a wheelie bin. Hope no one takes it.”

“But you’ve got a match tomorrow!”

“But you’ve got a match tomorrow!”

“Lily.” Dorcas placed a hand on Lily’s forearm. “I don’t give a fuck about the match.”

Lily gazed down at Dorcas’s dark hand, then up at her face. “It’s possible,” she said, “that I might be in a bit of shock.”

“You did just watch someone get shot and then someone else die. So.”

Lily’s hands reached up to tangle in her hair, scratching against her scalp. “God, Sirius shot someone. And Riddle died. He just fell out the window and—and died.”

Dorcas’s mouth slanted. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m really, really pleased he’s dead, but also…seeing his body smashed on the pavement was really fucked up.”
“Shit.” Lily’s hands came down from her hair. “I’m so sorry, Dorcas. That must have been horrible.”

“I didn’t see it happen, at least. Pettigrew had the front door. But still…”

They both fell silent after that. Lily’s mind wouldn’t stop an endless replay of the events in the office—she should have been able to do something differently, there had to have been another way—and she suspected Dorcas was wishing she hadn’t just seen Riddle’s crumpled corpse.

Poor Dorcas. She’d probably have nightmares for months, just because she’d wanted to help. Because she was an amazing friend.

“Thank you,” Lily said. “Seriously. You don’t have to stay—your mums must be worried out of their minds, and—”

“They understand friendship emergencies. I told them your boyfriend was in hospital.”

“He’s not my—I mean, maybe he is, I don’t—we never…” Lily sprung up from her seat, throwing her arms down to her sides. “God, Dorcas, what if he doesn’t…”

“Oh, come on, he’s going to live. People survive lung collapses all the time. My aunt’s lung randomly collapsed once and it took her a whole week to notice.”

“I’m pretty sure James noticed!”

“Look. I can’t tell you he’s going to be fine ’cause obviously I don’t know any more than you do. But I just don’t think this is how the story’s going to end. Not after all that.”

It had felt like they were in a story, back when it was all new. Back when beating the villain of the day was easy, and assured, and everything had been in balance for a few months.

But this wasn’t a story. This was Lily’s life, and so far things kept bending toward tragedy, no matter how hard she tried to force it another direction.

Her breaths grew heavy, and the tears she’d been fighting off started pooling, and why did she keep ending up in hospital waiting rooms for her loved ones after they’d tried to help her—

Dorcas grabbed Lily’s arm and yanked her back into her seat. “I’d take you on a walk,” she said, “but I know you want news the minute the doctor comes back, so sit down and I’ll tell you funny stories about my mums.”

This proved an effective distraction only because Dorcas’s mums were ridiculous and did things like accidentally buy each other the same Christmas present. But it only worked as long as Dorcas could talk, and eventually her parched throat demanded fluids.

She briefly left to fetch them two steaming cups of tea, and a new distraction in the way of Remus and Peter, each bearing a tea of their own.

Lily went in for hugs immediately.

“Sirius is a bloody madman,” she said, releasing Peter.

“Agreed,” said Remus. “Also a terrific shot, it turns out.”

Lily scanned the area to make sure no one else was within listening range. “Where the hell did he even get a gun?”
“Sirius said, rather enigmatically, that a family friend provided it.”

Dorcas grinned. “He said he’d been practicing at a range for months.”

Lily stared at her. “He what?”

“I rather expect,” Remus said, “that Sirius quickly tired of sitting on the sidelines.” He sipped his tea. “And he has always been exceptionally successful when he actually puts his mind to something.”

“He’s mad. You’re all mad. You all came—you came prepared too, I can’t—when did you even…”

“After lunch,” Dorcas said.

Peter patted his pocket. “We had a group chat.”

Because they’d shown up, because they’d insisted on helping, everything had technically turned out the way Lily wanted. She and James had recovered the Moth Miraculous and both left the scene alive.

But Petunia was probably terrorized, and Sirius was in jail, and James was having surgery on his chest.

Still, Lily couldn’t bear thinking about what would have happened if their mates hadn’t provided back-up. She didn’t want to know what choice she would have made in Riddle’s office, and now their friends had made sure she’d never have to.

Lily pressed the rim of her cup against her lips, then removed it. “Bloody mad, the lot of you. But also…thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Remus said. “But truly one of us exceeded expectations here.” He raised his cup. “To Sirius, the maddest Black yet.”

They all matched his gesture, lifting their sad, Styrofoam cups in the air. The fluorescent strip lights overhead cast Remus and Peter in a sickly shade befitting a hospital. Then again, the fact that a surgeon was sticking a needle in their best mate probably wasn’t helping their coloring.

“To all of you,” Lily said. “Thanks for not listening to us.”

“To James recovering,” said Peter.

“To Riddle’s murder,” Dorcas said, louder than Lily would have liked.

Lily forced herself to drink some tea. It tasted like dirt, but at least it was hot, and she was desperate enough for distraction that she welcomed the burn on her tongue.

Remus cleared his throat. “I believe,” he said in a low voice, “we should begin referring to it as a tragic accident.”

Dorcas nodded. “It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

Peter lowered his cup, frowning. “What’re you saying?”

The three of them delved into the important work of coming up with a cover story, and Lily should have joined in. In fact, as the resident superhero, she should have been leading the charge. As it was, though, she found herself doing nothing more than silently clutching her cup, her brain stuck in a loop of thoughts: wondering how James was, lamenting what a mess this had turned into, and
wishing she could just lie down on the floor and go to sleep.

Fortunately, the others didn’t ask her to contribute a word.

Together the three of them cobbled together a narrative. It wasn’t pretty. But it was something.

In the version James and Sirius and Lily would tell, the three of them had come to Riddle’s office to protest his policies. Riddle had been in a meeting with several of his key staff.

“But the hotel cameras won’t back that up,” Dorcas said. “They’ll show Ladybug and Chat Noir jumping into the office.”

Peter chewed on a hangnail. “Riddle turned the hotel cameras off earlier. I checked.”

Per their story, Lily and James overheard something they shouldn’t have. Their eavesdropping was discovered, and in a moment of panic, Yaxley grabbed James while Malfoy tied Lily up. Sirius escaped, grabbing a gun from the office in the process, and sought out Sev for help.

After that point, the story mostly converged with reality, only Sev broke the window with the drone at the same moment he and Sirius had kicked down the door. Severus bashed Riddle in the back of the head with the drone, and Riddle accidentally stumbled out the window.

Remus looked at Lily gently. “I’m afraid Snape comes off the hero.”

Lily and James would seem like uppity teenagers and unwitting victims, but there wasn’t a great alternative story. Besides, Lily had had enough of being the hero. What mattered was they’d won, and that James would very hopefully be all right.

The worst part of the plan was that there would be an outcry from Riddle’s followers after this. He’d almost definitely become a martyr. But there was nothing for it.

Lily lifted one shoulder. “I don’t care if Severus seems like a hero, and if James makes a fuss about it—well, I’ll handle it, but I just—I wish we could say Riddle was Voldemort.”

They couldn’t, of course. Not without everyone immediately assuming that Lily was Ladybug, and James was Chat Noir.

“Very well,” Remus said. “As the only affected party able to speak, your approval is the only one that matters. I’ll share the story with Sirius’s solicitor to pass on.”

Dorcas frowned. “That doesn’t cover Snape and the others, though. They don’t have any reason to go along with our version, so we need to start looking into blackmail material.”

“I’ll handle Severus,” Lily said evenly.

He’d have no issue claiming more credit than he deserved. In Severus’s mind, he probably was the hero. He’d probably deluded himself into thinking he’d saved her life.

The crease that had etched itself on Peter’s forehead deepened. “The police were asking me questions because I was Riddle’s assistant, and I overheard Malfoy talking to them. He told the police he ran in at the last minute, right after Riddle went out the window.”

Remus tapped a finger against the side of his empty cup. “It may be a matter of numbers. If we present a consistent message, and convince Snape to share it as well, then there’s some chance they’ll listen to us over Malfoy, and whatever Yaxley tells them.”
The door to the waiting room opened to admit Euphemia and Mr. Potter, their hands clutched together between them, their mouths set in matching grim lines. They were bound to look miserable—their son was in hospital—but the lack of evident relief sent Lily’s heart stumbling.

Euphemia’s lips lifted slightly when she caught sight of the four of them huddled in the waiting room corner.

“My darlings,” she said, letting go of Mr. Potter to rush over to them.

Lily did not want to ask. She did not want to know the bad news. And yet her tongue and teeth formed the words, “Is he going to be all right?”

Euphemia answered by throwing her arms out, wrapping them around Lily, and drawing her in close.

It was a perfect, motherly hug. Under other circumstances Lily would have savored this sort of hug, and matched Euphemia’s grip at once, but she couldn’t. Something heavy tugged at her chest, pulling away all her insides, leaving her scraped hollow.

The Potters were only here because James had thrown himself in harm’s way on her behalf.

Lily slipped out of the hug, looking at the floor. “And?”

While Euphemia hugged Remus, Peter, and even Dorcas, Mr. Potter—or Fleamont, as he insisted—explained that James’s prognosis was excellent. Lily barely had time to breathe out in relief when Euphemia, very naturally, asked for an explanation of how James had been stabbed, and why Lily had been there, and how Sirius had ended up arrested for shooting someone.

Every word Lily knew disappeared from her brain as she stood there, petrified.

“Lily’s just told us everything,” Remus said smoothly. “She’s a bit in shock, so if you take a seat, I can fill you in on the details.”

Lily excused herself to the loo, mouthing a thank-you to Remus behind Euphemia’s back. She seriously owed him, and all the others, in a way she’d never fully make up.

After a bit of mindless wandering, she located a small, single-room toilet near the lifts. She bolted the door shut with a satisfying thunk, and then paused, fingers still on the handle, uncertain of what to do.

What to do. Like she could do anything but sit here and stare at this synthetic, mauve door and wish, as always, for things to be different than they were.

She tipped forward, letting her forehead connect satisfyingly with the door, and took in a deep breath.

The memory of blood seeping out from under his hands kept hurling itself into the forefront of her mind. Then the blooming stain on her cardigan, and the angry sirens pounding in her ears while she helped press the fabric into place.

Her hands started to tremble. The too-familiar sense of hot tears prickled at the corners of her eyes.

“Fuck,” she said, and turned around in place. She rested her back against the door and slid down onto the germ-infested tile because it didn’t matter, nothing mattered, James was going to be all right but this was all so fucked up.
Mary poked her head out of Lily’s purse, checked the surroundings, and darted out.

“Oh, Lily,” she said. “You’re all right, you won and you’re all right—”

“But James isn’t.” Lily rubbed her shaking palms over her wet eyes. “He’s always so—so stupidly noble, and even back when—when he didn’t know it was me, when he didn’t know I was Lily bloody Evans, he was always doing that for me, and he didn’t have to this time, he could’ve got the Miraculous after Voldemort hurt me, and why did he…”

Mary perched on Lily’s knee. “He cares about you.”

“I know, but he—I didn’t want him to, he’s been hurt so many times for me, and it’s not fair.”

“No, it isn’t, but it turned out all right. The doctors said he’d be fine.”

“If I just hadn’t been so stupid, looking away, or if I hadn’t run at Voldemort like he wanted, or if I’d seen James coming and pushed him away—or if I’d never told Sev off, he might not’ve told Riddle who I was, and maybe we’d have really got him by surprise—”

Mary flew up to stroke Lily’s heated cheek. “Lily. It’s not your fault.”

“And James was still cracking stupid jokes afterwards, god, I just—I love that stupid bastard, but honestly, he’s so…”

She had no ending in mind, though. He was so James. So Chat.

Unfailingly there for her. Unfailingly himself.

She swiped at the tears that had built up. “Mary,” she said. “Mary, can’t you do something? You’ve got all this power—can’t you undo things like when we finish off an akuma?”

“I’m sorry, Lily, but that’s not possible. And you know I’d do anything if I could.”

“He’s going to be fine,” said another voice from inside Lily’s purse. A tiny orange cat climbed out and zipped up to hover by Mary. “I know how badly he was hurt. It isn’t as serious as it could have been.”

“But he shouldn’t have been hurt at all,” Lily said.

“He made his choice. Stop blaming yourself.”

Lily sniffled and stared at Algernon. “Wait,” she said. “Now you talk?”

Algernon rolled his eyes.

Mary crossed her arms and positively glared at him. “He’s been ridiculous all year,” she said. “Leaving poor James alone for months to figure things out. Dumbledore will definitely be hearing about this.”

“James had Sirius,” Algernon said. “It was fine. They got the Moth Miraculous back.”

“No, it was not fine, you made me do all the work—”

“Look,” Lily said. “I’m having a crisis of my own, so could the two of you maybe have it out in my purse?”
“Of course,” Mary said, at the same time Algernon said, “He’ll be fine.”

Lily grabbed her purse and held it open. “In you get.”

Mary hopped in at once, but Algernon flew up to Lily’s ear to say, “He really is going to be fine—don’t be so hard on yourself,” before joining Mary.

The doctors had said James would recover…but still. There was a chance. There were infections, and surgeries that went wrong, and any number of things that might yet change the prognosis…

But she’d never learn what happened waiting in here. She took a deep breath and pushed herself to her feet, then grabbed a paper towel to dab at her eyes.

When she emerged from the loo, Peter was lurking, wringing his hands together.

“Oh,” she said. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

She waited for him to say something, but after a few moments of silence, she told him, “The men’s room is to the left.”

“No, I know, it’s just…” Peter checked both ways, and lowered his voice. “I’ve been thinking that you…you could have all three Miraculouses. If you went and took James’s ring when he’s out of surgery.”

Lily waited again, and again to no effect. Peter just kept looking at her.

“And?” she prompted.

“And…and with James, it’s only…” Peter swallowed. “If it gives you ultimate power, couldn’t you fix him?”

Lily gave him a strange look. “No,” she said, and headed back toward the waiting room.

Peter trailed after her, his footsteps echoing in the corridor. “He’d do it for you.”

“No,” she said definitively, and rested a hand on her purse. “He absolutely wouldn’t.”

James’s world came back to him in fits and starts.

The first time he remembered waking up, feeling like his head was suspended in a fishbowl, he saw his dad at his side, staring despondently out the dark window.

He didn’t remember anything after that, not until he woke up again, this time to sunlight straining in against the closed blinds. Euphemia had taken up the threadbare chair next to him, and sat with a pen and the crossword.

“Finally.” She set the newspaper on the nightstand and handed him his glasses. “I know you’re a sleepy teenager, but honestly.”

James cracked his jaw yawning while the world came back into focus. “Don’t count on me being up very long,” he mumbled, his right hand drifting up to rest on his ribs. There were an awful lot of bandages under his sheets and gown, and even more pain drugs clouding his brain. His chest still ached.
“You’ve been out for hours. Don’t send me into another stretch of agonized waiting. I require an explanation.”

“Thought doctors were s’posed to do the explaining.” He peered down at his torso. “What state am I in?”

“The living kind,” she said dismissively. “Coy is certainly in your repertoire on occasion, but there’ll be none of that now, James.”

Normally he’d be squirming under this sort of pressure from her, but the meds kept him feeling like he was a weightless, floating thing. “Y’mean an explanation of how I ended up getting stabbed by the mayor?”

“I was rather hoping you’d explain how Lily Evans came to be there with you, but I admit, the stabbing is higher on my list of inquiries.”

For being in front of her injured son in a hospital room, she was really lacking a comforting, maternal expression.

“Don’t remember,” he said sleepily.

She raised an imperious eyebrow. “James.”

He gave a half-hearted shrug. “Ask Lily.”

“I already have.”

“And?”

“I’m hardly about to ruin this prisoner’s dilemma. This is an interrogation of your version.”

James’s mind was much too drugged to even attempt to outwit his mum. She’d never take silence for an answer, and he had no way of guessing what the others had said, and so he had no choice.

It would be a relief, actually, to do this. And it wouldn’t put her in harm’s way to know. Not any longer. She’d probably think he was drugged up, of course. Which he was, but not about this.

The heart monitor at his side beeped quicker.

“I’m…” He cleared his throat, watching her warily. “I’m Chat Noir.”

The magic had taken a second to break with Peter, and it would probably take longer with her, since it would have rooted deeper in her mind as his mum. James just hoped she didn’t turn to her usual punishment for lying to her, which was banning him from bakery treats for a week. It was unbearable to have no biscuits for rewarding people.

Her lined face remained placid. “Obviously,” she said. “I meant how did you get stabbed?”

“Obviously—obviously?” The monitor peeped even louder as James tried to push himself up.

“What’s obvious about that?”

“Stay where you are, dear.” She reached out and pressed a finger on the good side of his chest, which was sadly enough to keep him pinned down to his bed. “You think we can’t recognize our own son?”

He let out a scandalized noise and gripped the rails on the sides of his bed. “Dad knows?”
“James, you know we love you to pieces. That is, we prefer you whole, but you truly do have the subtlety of a fog horn.”

“Sirius knew. Remus knew. You knew. Dad knew!”

“Poor Peter. I assume you only told him recently.”

James would have loved to cross his arms over his chest, but he suspected the pressure would make him cry, and that would undermine his indignation.

“Why didn’t you tell me you knew?” he demanded.

“I assumed you hadn’t told us to protect us. I didn’t want you worrying about us knowing.”

They were protecting him from having to protect them. Ridiculous! He was the superhero here.

“This is an outrage,” he said. “A complete and thorough outrage. I think the drugs are keeping me from properly conveying how outraged I am about this.”

“Focus, darling, and watch your blood pressure. I’m still waiting to learn how you ended up stabbed by the mayor.”

James harrumphed. At least it didn’t seem like she was going to punish him over any of this, but still. This was humiliating.

On the upside, he could undo some of that humiliation by recounting his act of bravery.

“Very well,” he said. “I will tell you the tale. Begrudgingly.”

“You’re smiling, you doped up idiot. You’re very proud of yourself.”

“You know,” James said, his smile dropping. “You are not making me feel remotely good. Give me more morphine.”

“No. Tell me the story, James.”

“Pushy, pushy,” he muttered. “Well since you apparently know bloody everything, it probably goes without saying that Lily is Ladybug—”

His mum’s thrilled screech drowned out the rest of his sentence.

James waited for her to finish. Then for the nurse who burst into the room to be mollified by his mum that everything was fine. Then for his mum to finish talking through the admittedly funny and ridiculous aspects of Lily being Ladybug.

Honestly, it was getting a little tedious to hash through it at this point. Yes, they were idiots. Yes, it was absurd. And yes, they were definitely into each other. There was nothing new to uncover there.

If James had known how rehashing the fight would feel, though, he wouldn’t have tried to skim through the prologue. Because describing his key moment of simultaneous panic and clarity didn’t, as expected, puff him up with pride. Instead his voice hitched when he detailed aloud the moment in which he’d launched sideways, when Ladybug’s chest had pushed him forward, when Voldemort’s sharp blade had slid neatly into James’s body.

The morphine certainly helped him get through it. But not nearly enough.
His mum threw herself forward to try to give him an awkward, one-armed hug, but even that pressure sent shooting pains through his chest. She apologized profusely, and settled for carding her fingers through his hair.

That soothing motion came in awfully handy when she broke the awful, but predictable, news of Sirius’s arrest.

“But he was helping us,” James said through a yawn. Her fingers, combined with the drugs and the being-stabbed bit, really had a soporific effect.

“I know, dear.”

“‘S not fair.”

“I know.”

“They’re gonna let ‘im go, right?” he mumbled, nestling his head into his pillow.

“Of course they will. Eventually.” She brushed a lock of hair off his forehead. Her hands smelled like yeasty dough. Like home. “Go to sleep, dear. We’re so, so proud of you.”

Everyone he cared about knew his secret. They’d beat Voldemort for the last time. And best of all, Lily Evans fancied him.

It was to be a comedy, then, he thought, smiling as he drifted off, the pulse of the monitors slow and steady at his side.

If he dreamed during his nap, he didn’t remember it. He almost thought he might be dreaming when he woke up again because Lily had replaced his mum in the chair. Then he remembered that Lily had kissed him.

Repeatedly.

Dreams officially had nothing on reality.

“All right, Evans?” he asked, although sleep and morphine slurred his words.

Her shoulders slumped as she let out a humorless laugh. “I’m not an expert, mind, but I thought that the person in my chair was supposed to ask that question.”

“Yeah,” he said, blinking hard to try to force himself awake, “but we know how I am. I’m stabbed. How’re you?”

She sat back in the worn teal chair, her head ducked, her fingers fiddling together in her lap. Some of the flowers adorning his bedside table matched the shade of her hair.

“How am I?” she asked, letting her hands lay flat on her stomach. “Well, my former best mate betrayed me. Voldemort kidnapped my sister, had someone slice her neck, and then tried to blackmail me into giving up the country. Then he wrapped it all up by stabbing you in the chest.”

James nodded seriously. “So the night was a solid five out of ten. Could’ve done with more puns.”

Her chest jerked as a laugh escaped her. “Oh, god, James,” she said. “I’m so bloody exhausted.”

“I’d invite you into my bed but I think my mum would slip an engagement ring on you.”
“On her own behalf, I hope.”

“Of course. And you should say yes—she’s a real catch.” He cocked his head, sniffing. “Is it the drugs, or do I smell MSG?”

She reached down the far side of the chair and pulled up a wide, brown paper bag. “Hospital food’s rubbish,” she said, looking sheepish, “so I ordered a Chinese.”

James laughed, but then winced when it pulled at the stitches in his abdomen. “Since we couldn’t go get it in costume?”

Her cheeks flushed. “Yes. Fewer headlines this way. Although we’re already in the headlines, really, just not for something as minor as this.”

It had been more than half a day since Riddle had died, so naturally the whole world would know everything by now.

James searched for the button to adjust the angle of his bed. “Have all of Riddle’s fans turned on him after learning he was Voldemort, then?” he asked. “Please tell me yes. And if they haven’t, please lie to me because I don’t want to have such little faith in humanity.”


Over orange pork and kissing duck, she told him about the version of events the others had concocted to protect Lily’s and James’s identities. About what Malfoy had said, and what Snape would say, and that Yaxley had nothing to say since he’d died overnight.

“But Riddle was Voldemort,” James said, brandishing his chopsticks. “We’ve got to tell the press about that because he was such a bloody hypocrite.”

“But I don’t want everyone to know I was Ladybug,” she said. “Maybe you want everyone to know you were Chat Noir—”

“No, I mean, I dunno, I haven’t thought about it, but…fuck.”

She rested her chopsticks across a white carton of rice. “I know, James. It’s rubbish. But whenever the police find Petunia and drag me in, this is the story I’m going to tell them.”

There was no getting around it: if they outed Riddle as Voldemort, everyone would know Lily and James were Ladybug and Chat Noir. They might be able to come up with a better cover story if they had more time, but the police would probably be banging down James’s door soon enough, too.

James huffed a heavy breath and regretted it immediately, wincing in pain. “Fine,” he managed to say. “Whatever.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “This would’ve been easier if we could’ve run away from the hotel—if you hadn’t been stabbed because of me—”

“Hey, no, don’t—this isn’t because of you.”

Lily’s hands tightened on the sides of the rice carton, the cardboard denting in beneath her fingertips. “I’m the one that made a mistake. I’m the one that should’ve been hurt.”

“You didn’t make a mistake, and neither did I.”

“I shouldn’t have looked away from him—”
“We always look away from the villain.”

“And you shouldn’t have taken the hit. It was meant for me.”

“You had to beat the akuma later—or that’s what I thought then, and you thought that, too, and I thought any damage would get magically fixed. So don’t pretend I didn’t make the right call, all right, ’cause I did what needed to be done. Or what we thought needed to be done, anyway.”

Late morning sunlight slanted in through the half-open blinds, catching on the stray hairs escaping her messy bun. Those gorgeous eyes of hers had slid away from his while he’d talked. Her mouth could and often did set in a defiant line, but thankfully it didn’t now, instead slipping into something like unease, and resignation.

She loosened her grip on the carton, its sides snapping back into place with a pop.

“James.” She dragged her eyes up to him. “Thank you.”

His mouth always had words ready to fly, even when he didn’t know what they’d be before he said them, but nothing came out now. What could he say? Or rather, what could he say that the heart monitor wasn’t already broadcasting? She hadn’t even really said that much, but his heart was such a sensitive, wanting thing…

“You’re—you’ve always been there for me,” she said, “ever since we started being partners, and I didn’t know it but you were, and I…I don’t have much of that.”

“Yeah,” he said, because the machine communicated a lot, but not everything. He scrubbed at his hair with one hand. “I’m…I’m getting that.”

Her lips pressed together, and she swallowed. “When you were on the floor in his office, I kept thinking… The thing is, James, I’m—I’m sorry I didn’t tell you I was grounded. Or other things, I’m just—”

“No, Lily—look, I don’t care.” He pushed the rotating tray on his bed to swing away. “I completely get it. I mean, I got kinda paranoid, and I thought you were, like, disappointed it was me, but—”

“Disappointed?” She set her rice carton on the bedside table without looking away from him, nesting it beside some carnations. “James, no, how could you—but of course you could, I’m such an idiot —”

“No, ’cause like, you’d been telling me about how miserable your family was—mostly as Ladybug, but like, I never put it together, and I just—I never thought family could do that to each other, and—”

“Because your family is good and lovely, no, I—that makes loads of sense. But I never thought you’d put it together, I wasn’t thinking about you, I was just thinking about me—”

“Well so was I, I mean, honestly, thinking I knew you from like interviews and what you did at school, even though I know you hold back at school, so why would I think that being in love with you would mean I knew everything—”

“Oh, come on, I was in love with Chat and I barely knew anything about him, so it’s not like…”

James’s mouth went dry.

Lily abruptly grabbed the kissing duck container and stared down into it.
The monitor peeped obnoxiously next to him. Even though James had just spilled the blatant words out himself, the bloody machine didn’t have to keep blathering on about his feelings.

He coughed. “Er. I mean…”

Her face had turned scarlet. “It’s not like…we didn’t know…”

“No, but like…” He idly prodded a finger against the needle disappearing into the crook of his elbow. It grated less than being so thoroughly exposed.

They’d both known after that conversation in his pantry, although they hadn’t known it was each other. But like she’d said—telling a stranger, or thinking you were telling a stranger, was simple, as easy as making chocolate biscuits…

Telling the person who mattered was hand-making croissants.

Lily sucked in a breath and heaved it out, pulling back her shoulders and shaking a few hairs out of her face. “I know we’ve said it loads of times,” she said, “but we’re both idiots.”

He tipped a smile at her. “Lucky for me, there’s no one I’d rather be an idiot with.”

Her face started to look down toward her lap, but then she pulled it back up, and let out another deep breath. “Me neither.”

She was such an incredible being. Braving her sister’s wrath every time she went off to battle. Enduring inhumane living conditions. And somehow, through it all, maintaining her kind, genuine core.

He’d thought he’d known how much he loved Lily Evans all along, but he hadn’t comprehended how truly phenomenal she was. Not until now.

He stuck out a hand toward her. “Hi,” he said. “I’m Potter, James Potter, secret code name Chat Noir.”

He’d thought she might need a second to catch on, but as always she knew exactly where he was headed.

“Oh,” she said, a corner of her lips twitching. “I actually like Ladybug better. Any chance you could introduce me to her instead?”

He tried to give her a suave smile, but it probably looked terribly silly, his heart tumbling along in his chest.

She stood up so she could delicately shake his hand, the wires attached to him swinging in the air. “Lily Evans, or as I’m known on occasion, Ladybug.”

Her grip lingered.

She had such lovely hands. They’d held his before, and brushed through his hair, and touched nearly every part of his body at some point or another. And yet this touch was lighter, gentler, and served no battle purpose at all.

She was here, and wonderful, and so close that he could identify the faint few freckles dotted across her nose.

But she still wasn’t quite close enough.
He lifted his left elbow and nodded down at the IV. “Hey,” he said. “Does this look like it’s coming out?”

Without letting go of his hand, she bent down to get a closer look. He brought the arm up toward her, but then bent it, cupping his hand around her neck and pulling her in for a kiss.

He did it too hard and their teeth knocked together a bit, but they settled into a groove soon enough. Her hand released his to grip the bedrail, while the other settled lightly on his shoulder.

Technically it wasn’t their first kiss, or even their second, but their masks had always been firmly in place before. This time it was James and Lily, and yes, Ladybug and Chat Noir, but they were them and they were kissing, swiftly demolishing any other thoughts in his brain.

He’d waited months for this, and now it was here, now it was happening, and if this was all he had to do for the rest of his life, that would be no hardship at all.

“I do hate to interrupt,” said a voice.

A voice in the room.

Someone in the room with them oh shit.

Lily jerked away from James, her cheeks going red.

“Dumbledore!” James said, swiping the back of his hand over his mouth. “Er, ah, didn’t hear you come in there.”

“Yes, I expect not. And if I did not have a pressing appointment after this, I would have returned at a later time.” His eyes did that weird twinkling thing. “The waiting room has terrific knitting magazines.”

“Er,” said Lily.

James sent her a minute shrug.

“Mr. Potter.” Dumbledore smiled. “I’m so pleased to hear you’re expected to make a quick, full recovery.”

“How’d you hear that?” James asked. “Oh, god, you didn’t talk to my mum, did you?”

“Some fear the aging process. I, however, find my appearance rather beneficial on occasion, particularly where it concerns others and their assumptions about the range of my hearing.”

Dumbledore hadn’t come to them at any point in all of this, no matter how dire things had become. Which left only one reason he’d shown up now of all times.

James never intended to use the phrase butterflies in his stomach again for obvious reasons, but something similar had happened during the kiss. Now the lingering sensation vanished instantly.

Lily beat James to accusing, “You’ve come for the Miraculouses.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Well spotted.”

“You need a wider repertoire,” James said sharply.

“Ah,” said Dumbledore. “Have I used that one before? Perhaps there are downsides to being one
“hundred and eighty.”

James and Lily shared a quick look that agreed they wouldn’t ask.

Her hand clenched around the bedrail as she turned to Dumbledore. “After all that,” she said. “After you barely helped us, and we had to find Voldemort on our own, and it turned out he was the bloody mayor, and Sirius had to shoot someone, and James got *stabbed*, and Riddle *died*—you show up now and want take them back. Just like that.”

“I’m not precisely certain I follow your interpretation of *like that*, but I believe I comprehend the general message. To which the answer is, yes, I’m afraid the duty of a Guardian is first and foremost to protect the Miraculouses. Now that you’ve accomplished your mission, I must place all three Miraculouses back into storage.”

“You could at least say thanks,” James snapped. “Or, like, literally anything nice here.”

“I had planned a few words of gratitude, but I’m afraid you rather preempted my opportunity by guessing at my motives for visiting. Please rest assured that I am prouder of you two than I had even dared to hope.”

Lily’s lips twisted. “D’you hear that, James? He’s proud of us.”

“Oh, brilliant. If we get four more nods of approval, do we get a free coffee or something?”

“My first thought was a free sandwich, personally.”

“Maybe a gold star. I could go for a gold star.”

Dumbledore smiled. “I’m happy to part ways at once, if that would be most convenient for the two of you.”

The monitor announced the sudden spike in James’s heart rate, and that was fine, because Dumbledore should know how obnoxious his timing was. What sort of impact this would have on James, and on Lily, too.

Fortunately, James didn’t need to be more overt. Not when he had his partner around.

“No,” Lily retorted. “You can’t have the Miraculouses yet because I have to say goodbye to Mary.”

“Yes, exactly. I’ve got to say goodbye to Algernon.” James frowned. “I mean, wherever he is. Assuming he’s here in the building ’cause I can’t leave. But if he’s not, you still can’t have him yet.”

A familiar orange head popped out of Lily’s purse. “Now he worries about me.”

“Oi,” said James, although his immediate grin probably undercut the annoyance he was trying to convey. “I was kind of busy *being stabbed*.”

Algernon rolled his eyes and flew up to hover by James’s shoulder, the furry smell of him a welcome comfort.

Dumbledore nodded. “Of course you may exchange final words with your kwamis. I shall peruse the knitting magazines outside, and return in a few minutes.”

He stepped into the corridor, and Lily ducked into the bathroom for privacy. This was excellent because James did not intend to ever kick Lily Evans out of a room with a bed in it.
Alone after what felt like ages, James turned to Algernon, his tiny, flying companion of nine months. His miniature cat that had said so few words, and yet conveyed so much. His weird as fuck feline that had temporarily gifted him miraculous superpowers, and the chance to be something more.

How did James even begin to imagine going back to a normal life? One where he wasn’t always carrying around bacon bits in a bag and taking care not to accidentally sit on Algernon? And more immediately, how did he exchange last words with someone he’d only just begun to learn how to talk to?

“Sooo,” James said, tapping the fingers of one hand on the bed rail. “I know you don’t like words, but like…this is your last chance, so…”

Algernon swooped forward to bury his warm, soft head against James’s neck. “Don’t get stabbed again.”

James found himself smiling. “I mean, I’m not planning on it. I can’t promise it won’t happen, but without Voldemort around, it seems really unlikely.”

Algernon growled and nuzzled closer, his paws scraping lightly over James’s skin.

James didn’t mind. His throat had gone tight, even after he swallowed. “Don’t tell me this is your way of saying you’re going to miss me.”

Algernon didn’t say anything, which was as close to an admission as James figured he would get.

This would be the last time Algernon’s hummingbird heartbeat would drum so gently against James’s own pulse.

“Thanks,” James said, blinking to try to disperse the building wetness. “For choosing me.”

“Dumbledore chose you,” Algernon muttered.

“Yeah,” James said, voice cracking. “I know.”

They sat there for a moment in the thin rays of sunlight still falling in through the blinds, listening to the steady beep of the heart monitor and the dim rattle of a gurney passing by in the corridor.

Yeah, James was gaining Lily after all of this, but it didn’t seem fair that he had to give up Algernon after such a short time. Dumbledore was a cruel, horrible monster, gifting James a stray cat and then yanking him back in less than a year.

Algernon made a soft grumbling noise. “You did well,” he said.

“Yeah,” James said, his words coming out thin from his still-tight throat. “I know.”

“You’re a good kid.”

James reached up and stroked Algernon’s head with one finger, the tiny hairs tickling against his skin. “Where was this verbal encouragement for the first eight months, eh?”

“I hate talking. It’s not you.” Algernon’s tiny tail thumped against James. “But you did need me eventually.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I did.” James sniffled. “Thanks for…I dunno, all of this year.”

Algernon just purred, and said nothing more.
Lily had never really thought about saying goodbye to Mary. On some level she’d known it would have to happen eventually—she couldn’t stay Ladybug forever—but it had always seemed like a distant, improbable event. One contingent on them defeating Voldemort…which they’d done. Which very naturally meant the end of her superhero career.

After Lily shut the door, Mary flew forward to press her head against Lily’s cheek. “Oh, Lily, I’m so sorry. Dumbledore has the worst timing.”

Saying goodbye at all was wretched. Saying goodbye in a hospital loo that smelled strongly of lemon antiseptic added citrus to the wound.

There were so many monumental things happening in Lily’s life, and now was the moment when Dumbledore chose to rip away the one person that had seen Lily at her very lowest moments, and the one person that Lily had never had to worry about upsetting.

After a moment of savoring Mary’s residual warmth, Lily reached up and cupped Mary in her palm, bringing her down near her chest. “D’you think I could get away with giving Dumbledore some fake earrings back instead?”

Mary smiled knowingly. “Lily.”

“I know, I just…I’m really going to miss you.” Like it had so many times before when it was just the two of them, Lily’s voice wavered. “You and your bloody optimism. I kind of hate that you were right all along. Things did work out with Chat, and we did get the Moth Miraculous.”

Mary wrapped her short arms around the base of Lily’s thumb, her grip surprisingly firm. “Oh, Lily, I’m so, so proud of you.”

Lily had a hard time swallowing. “I’m so glad I had you for all of this, Mary. I couldn’t—I don’t want to think about what it would’ve been like without you there.” She reached up to stroke a finger over Mary’s head, her eyes welling up. “I know I gave you a lot of shit, but, Mary, I—”

“It’s all right, Lily. Really. I know you were frustrated about a lot of things, but not about me.”

A few hot tears slipped down Lily’s cheeks. She’d needed that patience and understanding, that boundless faith that things would get better, and now it was getting torn away without notice. “I’m going to miss you so much.”

“You’re going to be all right, Lily. I promise. You fight to make your own future, and that’s a superpower of its own.” Mary flew up for another press against Lily’s face, and then nodded at her. “It’s time.”

Lily tried to smile, but it came out stiff, her face too tense from trying not to cry harder. “Good-bye, Mary,” she said. “And thank you.”

She reached up to gently unhook one of the earrings, sliding it out of the tiny hole in her cartilage for the first time. The moment it slipped free, an invisible force sucked Mary into the red and black jewel.

That was it, apparently. That was all it took to become normal again.

Lily pulled out the other earring and placed them both in her palm, studying them. They were so
small and innocuous, and yet they held the vast power of creation within them. A power that was
hers no longer.

It was suddenly heartbreakingly quiet in the loo.

Lily wasn’t the only teary-eyed one reluctantly handing her Miraculous back to Dumbledore. He told
them he was proud again, told them to take care of themselves, and then thankfully removed himself
from the room. From their lives, really.

She wished she had some final cutting remark for him, but it was hard to think about that when her
ears felt so light, and her heart so heavy.

After the door had snicked shut, James knocked his foot into the bedrail, his lips downturned. “I
mean, I’m happy to see him go…”

Lily nodded as she fiddled with the settings on his bed. It took a bit of guessing, but she successfully
managed to lower the bedrail on one side. She sat down next to James’s waist, facing him, one hand
idly tracing over the back of his. “I didn’t think we’d have to give them up so soon.”

“Me neither. I thought—I dunno.” His eyes steadily tracked the movement of her hand. “I didn’t
think, I guess, or I’d’ve said more to Algernon. Maybe, anyway. He only started talking the other
day.”

“I’m sorry you didn’t get more time with your talking cat.” She paused to let out a hollow laugh.
“That sounded really facetious, but I did mean it.”

“No, I know what you meant.” He glanced down at their hands. “It’s weird not wearing my ring.”

She brushed her thumb over the paler strip of skin at the base of his finger. “My ears feel naked.
Which isn’t something I thought I’d ever say, but here we are.”

James’s breath hitched as her thumb continued sideways, following the divots and hills of his
knuckles. “I mean, I’m definitely gonna miss the little bugger, but also…” He turned his hand over
beneath hers so their warm palms met, their fingers intertwining. “There are some things I’d rather
not do with a cat in my pocket.”

If Lily had had a heart monitor attached to her, it would have spiked to an embarrassingly loud level.
“Is that right?” she asked.

“Mm,” he said, squeezing her hand. “So, you know…there’s an upside.”

She’d put poor Mary through two in-suit kissing sessions, and never once considered whether Mary
felt like a pervert mum spying on her children.

It didn’t lessen the loss, really, but in Mary’s honor, Lily would stick to optimism here.

“You make a terrific point,” she said.

“Of course I do. I’m brilliant. Very admired. Who else do you think brought me all these flowers and
chocolates?” He waved at the nightstand, the top barely visible under vases, candy boxes, and
takeaway cartons.

“Your mum, obviously.” She scanned over the few boxes of chocolates to look for her preferred
brand. “I know my only romantic competition was myself—” She abruptly stood up, her fingers still
interwoven with his, her mouth curving into a frown. “Why do you have a card for me?”
He turned his head toward the nightstand. “What?”

She let go of him to pick up the white envelope labeled *Lily Evans*, which sat propped in front of a vase of irises.

“It could be a love note from my mum,” James said skeptically. “But I dunno why she wouldn’t have just given it to you in person.”

Lily nudged open the unsealed flap and slid out a small card of thick white paper. McGonagall’s familiar, slanted handwriting only took up a few lines.

*Miss Evans,*

*I apologize for not giving you this news in person. You were asleep when I stopped by, and this seemed a safer place for a note than the waiting room.*

*I intended to share the good news with you later this week, but given last night’s events, I thought you would prefer to know as soon as possible. I’m pleased to announced that you’ve been granted the Order of the Phoenix scholarship for Hogwarts, effective next term. This scholarship covers the entirety of your tuition—*

The letter only had a couple more sentences, but Lily’s fingers let the paper slip free. She barely noticed that James’s hand darted out to catch it before it fell past him.

“Oh my god.” She sank down onto the side of the bed. “Ohmygod.”

“Oh no,” he said. “If my mum proposed, remind her polygamy is still illegal!”

She waved a hand at the letter, giving him silent permission to read, and he looked down at it immediately.

Her heart skittered frantically in her chest. She placed her hands on her knees, steadying herself.

“McGonagall visited me!” he noted cheerfully, but it sounded very distant.

She hadn’t even thought about her modeling contracts since they’d gone to fight Riddle, but no company would want to have someone involved in the mayor’s death on their payroll. They’d all dump her immediately.

But even if they didn’t…she could quit. She could be a regular student and get her free time back and—

And she’d have much more free time now, wouldn’t she, without Voldemort around. She wouldn’t have to skive off class all the time. She wouldn’t have to abandon Dorcas at odd moments or find an excuse to leave a photoshoot.

Because there’d be no photoshoots, and no villains to best.

And without her contracts…

Her hand flew up to cover her mouth, suppressing a choked noise that fell somewhere between a laugh and a sob.

She wouldn’t have to live with Petunia and Vernon anymore. Petunia’s leverage was moot.

Lily wouldn’t be trapped in that miserable little attic. She could have a real room with real windows
Lily been crying an awful lot lately, but this time she didn’t fight it at all, letting the tears fall freely as she lowered her hand from her face.

“Er,” said James, the letter still clutched in his hand. “D’you not want the scholarship?”

Lily smiled at him through her tears. “James,” she said. “I know we don’t know everything about each other, but you know this isn’t me being upset.”

He smiled back weakly. “Didn’t want to assume again, my lady.”

“It’d be all right if you did, so long as you became your own ass.” Her words came out tight from crying, but she powered through, her voice going up half an octave. “It’s quite nice.”

He laughed and let the letter fall into his lap, instead reaching out to grab her hand. “Does this mean you can move out, then?”

She nodded, clutching onto him, her chest feeling like it might burst any second.

“That’s brilliant!” he said “Have I mentioned how brilliant McGonagall is? Like, massively brilliant. Unbelievably brilliant.”

Her dear, sweet chaton. He really didn’t know everything, but he knew what mattered, and he cared with all his heart.

She reached across his waist to place a hand on the bed, then leaned her head in toward his. “Chaton,” she said. “You have really got to work on that vocabulary if we’re going to do this.”

“What,” he said, “this?”

And he kissed her, more insistent this time, more pressing, his hands tangling in her hair.

Mary was right. Lily had fought for her future. She hadn’t lucked her way into her place at Hogwarts, or their defeat of Voldemort, or this thing with Chat. She’d worked for every one of them. And she would have to keep working at everything because that was life, and there was nothing to be done for it.

But at least, she thought, feeling James smiling against her mouth, she wouldn’t have to work at it alone any longer.
Chapter 18

Lily sighed contentedly. “Can one of you do something to make it this perfect of a temperature every day?”

Her head lay in Dorcas’s lap while Dorcas braided a few tiny plaits into Lily’s long locks. They sat with the boys beneath their favorite tree in the courtyard, the sun gilding the verdant leaves above them, the grass warm and soft below. A faint breeze rustled the pages of Peter’s textbook, which lay abandoned at his side.

Remus made an interested noise. “We never did see weather control among the villains, did we?”

“There was that ice ray bloke,” Dorcas said.

Peter stared at her. “You mean Mr. Binns?” When Dorcas stared right back at him, he added, “Our history teacher?”

“Is that his name?” she asked, focused on Lily’s hair.

“To be fair,” Sirius said, stretched out on his back with his hands behind his head, “it is physically impossible to pay attention to Binns. Someone should study the effects next year.”

Remus nodded. “Be scientific about it. Perhaps publish something.”

“A published work would look good to universities,” Lily said absently. No one had played with her hair since her mum, and she’d forgotten how lovely it felt. She checked in on James, who was still sitting with his arms folded around his knees. “Stop sulking,” she told him.

“Your head should be in my lap.”

“McGonagall almost literally saved my life. I’m hardly about to provoke her into a heart attack on the last day of term.”

James grumbled half-heartedly, then paused, cocking his head. “That’s fair. After teaching me English for all these years, she already has post-grammatic stress disorder.”

While Lily hid her smile, Peter and Dorcas groaned. Remus shook his head, and Sirius simply held out a hand, palm up, without opening his eyes.

James reached into his pocket and duly forked over a fiver. “Worth it,” he said. “I’ve been saving that one up all term.”

Lily stretched her leg out and nudged her bare foot into James’s shin. “You’re going to run out of puns at some point.”

“No,” he said emphatically. “I will not.”

He was so adorably adamant about something that absolutely didn’t matter, his eyes alight, the sun dappling his skin through the leaves. His glasses needed cleaning, and yet he always forgot that was an option. She had to keep reminding him.
Sirius brushed a hair out of his face. “I’ve been trying to get Euphemia to stop giving him an allowance so he’ll run out of money.”

James shrugged. “But she will never stop supporting me, her loving and only son.”

“New plan, then.” Sirius looked at Lily. “Convince Euphemia to give you James’s allowance.”

“Oh!” James said, thwacking the back of his hand against Sirius’s arm.

“You owe me,” Sirius told Lily.

“Speaking of things that will run out,” Lily said, “you can’t use that excuse for everything.”

Sirius raised his eyebrows at James. “Can’t I?”

“He can,” James lamented.

Lily pressed her toes into the grass, admiring the wispy clouds overhead and smiling. “James already tried to use getting stabbed to make me move in with him.”

“That’s not what I said!”

“Mhm,” Dorcas said. “You just told her you’d been having nightmares and that you’d sleep better if she was in your house.”

Remus looked at James dolefully. “Oh, James. You didn’t.”

“That’s awfully manipulative,” Peter said.

James threw his hands in the air. “I would sleep better if she lived with us!”

“There isn’t room for me there,” Lily said. “I’d hate to make your mum take on two full-time houseguests.”

“You know my mum. You know she would buy me a diamond ring to give you if you moved in.”

“She has proposed on your behalf several times. Once with icing on a biscuit.”

“That was for you?” he squawked. “She told me it was for a client!”

“In any case,” Dorcas said, finishing another braid, “you don’t have to worry, Potter. She’s safe with me, both from your mum and thieves or whatever. I’ll beat off any home intruders.”

James placed his legs straight out in front of him, letting his shin brush against Lily’s foot. They shared a brief glance of mutual interest, but quickly moved on.

“I do sleep better knowing she’s at your house,” he said to Dorcas. “Although I should also stop eating biscuits in bed. It makes for crumby sleep.”

The second he finished talking, he pulled out his wallet, ready to pay up. While the others settled for an assortment of groans and curses, Sirius feigned choking and passing out.

Considering the death Lily had recently witnessed, she didn’t find that part particularly funny. She tilted her head to gaze across the courtyard instead, checking the time on the large, ornate clock on the school wall.
Severus was standing beneath it. He was scowling while Malfoy talked at him, his arms tightly crossed. His eyes found hers, and her stomach flopped uncomfortably.

He’d done her a massive favor in lying to the police. It hadn’t even taken that much to convince him to do it—she’d simply asked, and he’d complied. Of course, it only helped him to claim that he hadn’t meant to do more than run the drone into Riddle as a distraction. Their mutual lie meant he walked away from the detention center without so much as a criminal charge.

Then he’d had the audacity to come up to her at school and ask her to eat lunch with him, like nothing had ever happened, like he’d never betrayed her identity or let Voldemort kidnap Petunia. Like he was the hero, and she the damsel in distress. Like she owed him.

He hadn’t taken her rejection well that time either. They hadn’t spoken since.

Sometimes, though, she caught him staring at her, and she wished things could be different. She wished he could be different.

But he couldn’t. Or he wouldn’t. And there was no point in losing sleep over that any longer.

She turned her face back up to Dorcas, who was snickering at something Remus had said, and then she took in the rest of her circle. It was funny, really. She’d come to Hogwarts for one friend, and ended the year with an entirely different set of mates. Better ones, too. Ones who secretly went to firing ranges and broke laws to help her. Ones who were as willing to fight for her as she was for them.

That wasn’t one of the benefits advertised in the Hogwarts brochure, but it was, she thought with a smile, absolutely worth the price of admission.

Before Lily had visited Severus at the detention center, she’d had to give the police her version of events. An officer eventually showed up at the hospital to drag her off to the station, where they’d corralled both a solicitor and, unfortunately, Petunia.

Lily was to meet with Petunia first, the officer assured her in patronizing tones. “So you can discuss your personal limits, and when she’ll need to intervene on your behalf.”

Lily had not been able to suppress a loud laugh in response.

“Shock,” Lily said quickly.

“Of course,” the officer replied sweetly, and opened the door to a tiny room with a rickety table, two seats, and a dim light fixture overhead.

Petunia sat on the very edge of one of the wooden chairs, her hands primly clasped in her lap, her face ashen.

Her hair was mussed. If there was a greater sign of the apocalypse, Lily didn’t know it.

A whole maelstrom of feelings whirled up at the sight of her—all those awful things Petunia had said, even in the midst of Lily literally saving her life, and that was on top of everything leading up to the fight—but the memory of McGonagall’s letter tamped it down.

Instead of immediately going at it, Lily just said, “’Lo, Petunia,” as she stepped inside, shutting the door behind her.
Petunia regarded her evenly, her eyes red. “Lily,” she said.

The police had left them a pitcher of water and two glasses on the table. Lily poured herself a glass, the noise deafening in the small room, and sat down across from Petunia.

Neither of them spoke for a while. Lily kept sipping at her water, waiting for Petunia to say whatever it was she wanted to say.

Because Petunia would want to say things. Many things, no doubt, none of which were things like thanks for saving my life or good job stopping the supervillain. Lily needed to get down to brass tacks, but she knew her sister, and her obnoxious penchant for lecturing.

The fluorescent lights emitted a faint buzz overhead.

At last, Petunia said, “You could have died.”

Lily set down her glass, and wiped up a spilled drop with the side of her palm. “Didn’t, though.”

“All those months you were rushing off to go fight him,” Petunia said, a faint tremor in her voice. “All those months you were putting us at risk—”

“You were safe. No one knew who I was.”

“But they obviously did! You must have made a mistake. Someone found out who you were, and I paid the price.” Petunia clasped a hand over the bandage on the side of her neck. “I imagine it’ll scar.”

Lily held back a scoff, and tried for a conciliatory tone. “I’m sorry you got hurt, but I’m not sorry for being Ladybug. I saved the city. I saved you.”

“Only after your freakishness put me in danger—”

“Stop.”

Petunia, surprisingly, shut up.

Lily pushed her water glass to the side, her heart suddenly racing. She didn’t have to listen to this. Not anymore.

“I’m moving in with Dorcas,” she said. “I’m quitting modeling. I’ve got a scholarship to Hogwarts. As soon as we finish talking to the police, I’ll go back with you and get my things.”

Petunia’s mouth opened, and then closed.

After a moment, she said, “I see.”

Because Lily couldn’t help herself, she said, “What else did you expect?”

Petunia sat there, looking down at her lap. Lily had been able to read that always-tense face of hers for most of their lives, but at some point an invisible wall had sprung up between them.

“So that’s it?” Petunia asked. “You’re moving out, and you’re never speaking to me again?”

“God, of course not, Tuney—I just—I can’t live there anymore. And I can’t imagine you want me to.”
Petunia said nothing.

Lily tipped the pitcher over the other glass until it was half-full, and slid it across the table.

Petunia didn’t look at it.

Lily had never planned to tell Petunia she was Ladybug. She’d always known Petunia was never going to be thrilled about it, but this…

They were sisters. And yet Petunia insisted on being this way. On making this all, once more, about her.

And still, foolishly, Lily cared. She’d been able to cut Sev off in the end, but this was Petunia. Despite everything, despite all the cold shoulders and heated words, all that cruelty had not beaten out every shred of love within Lily. Which, Mary would say, made Lily the better person.

Lily almost smiled, but just briefly.

“I’m moving,” she said. “But what about you? Will you and Vernon still move to Sussex with Voldemort gone?”

Petunia sniffed, and tugged down the hem of her skirt. A different one than she’d worn last night, this one clean and unrumpled. “It’s too early to say.”

And once more, Petunia would force Lily to be the bigger person. To keep trying. To keep pushing.

“Even after today,” Lily said, “even after I move out… I do want to know if you’re going to move. I want to know how the baby’s doing, and I want…” She couldn’t finish because she did not know what else she wanted.

For this not to be goodbye forever, but saying that was too final.

Petunia lifted her face, her expression still inscrutable. “I suppose,” she said, “I could let you know our plans.”

“And the baby’s gender,” Lily said. “When you know. And the names you’re thinking about. And—yeah.” She looked down herself then, to scrape out a lingering bit of dried blood from under her thumbnail.

Petunia nodded tersely. “Very well.” She glanced at the door. “I suppose they’ll want to talk to us soon.”

That would be as much as Lily would get, really. A very well. She told herself it could have been worse, but that didn’t quite ease the sting.

“Don’t worry.” Lily placed her hands flat on the table, and swallowed the lump in her throat. “We’ve got a plan…”

It took the hospital staff five days to agree to discharge James. He tried to persuade them to release him sooner, but they remained devoted to their “principles.” James blamed his mum for not bringing him bribing biscuits.

Instead she brought in a whole cake for the staff helping James, begging them for the best possible care for her dear son.
James hated her in that moment. He did not, however, hate cake, and angrily ate one piece, and then another. Just to spite her. There’d be less cake for the staff, after all.

The day they did release him, James got to put on trousers for the first time in days, and subsequently realized he’d never properly appreciated pockets before, or full arse coverage. Lily and his parents gifted him with balloons and biscuits as they wheelchaired him out to the car.

Most hospital patients would have headed straight home after that, but James had an important errand.

Remus and Peter met them outside the juvenile detention center, debating the merits of hospital food versus jail food. James opined it was a toss-up, possibly leaning toward jail, and gestured at his wheelchair for evidence.

They didn’t bicker much longer because the glass door swung open, and out marched Sirius, his hair tied back in a short ponytail, his leather jacket hanging off one finger over his shoulder.

He looked effortlessly cool, right up until Euphemia nearly tackled him with a hug.

There were more hugs after that, whether Sirius liked it or not, and a peck on the cheek from Lily. One that definitely did not turn James’s face red with envy.

Unlike Snape, Sirius hadn’t avoided charges, but his barrister was very confident that the eventual trial would find him innocent. It was like a ruddy Cluedo scene of a kidnapping gone wrong: a rope, a missing knife, and, in a twenty-first century twist, a drone. Everyone’s stories lined up except for Malfoy’s.

The Black family refused to deal with Sirius other than to send their family barrister over. James and Sirius celebrated this by drinking a bottle of Fleamont’s scotch that night. They had to christen Sirius’s newly permanent room, even if it meant sitting on the floor because there was no room for chairs.

“Cheers,” Sirius said, glass in hand, “to no more bloody fundraisers.”

“Well.” James lowered his mostly-full glass. “Sometimes I go with my mum and dad, and they might want you to go, too.”

“’S different,” Sirius said. “And there’re more biscuits here.”

“Mm, there are at that.” James raised his glass, and pretended to take a sip. He was not about to find out how ineffective his pain medications might be when combined with large quantities of alcohol.

Maybe this, he thought, was what it was like to grow up.

Then he burped, and reconsidered.

Sirius’s head tilted as he peered at James. Or rather, at James’s torso.

James followed his gaze down, and made a disappointed noise. “I’m gonna lose my muscles so fast without Voldemort to fight.”

But what he said seemed to brush right over Sirius’s head, unheard. Instead of responding properly, Sirius knocked back another swig of his drink, swallowed, and grimaced. “Can I see the stitches?”

Without hesitation, James reached for the hem of his shirt and hiked it up near his chest. He peeled
back the white medical tape and gauze, revealing the row of neat black lines keeping him mostly intact.

It would scar, but it didn’t matter. It was worth it.

Also he thought it made him look a bit more rakish. Lily seemed the type to like rakish. Or pirate-like.

Sirius scowled at the sight. “I should’ve shot Snape,” he said. “Just for the hell of it.”

“You should’ve shot him because he found out who we were from his drones, and then told Riddle.”

James made a disgusted noise. “And he didn’t cop to it, but I bet it was his idea to send an akuma past Pete’s window.”

Sirius shifted, bringing a knee up by his chest, and sipped his drink. “So there never was a villain?” he said. “Voldemort just called the akuma back to him or whatever?”

“I dunno, maybe? I’m not really sure how it works. Maybe he can call them off.”

“Pete saw one, though, yeah?”

“Yeah, and Snape said the akuma was a ruse, so.” James lifted a shoulder. “Remus was all, are you sure Peter saw something, and I—”

“Of course he saw something. Or he thought he did, anyway.”

“Right. Which is what I said.”

“I mean, what’s Remus implying? That Peter…”

“I dunno, it doesn’t—whatever. He dropped it, and Peter was dead apologetic about falling into Riddle’s trap. Like really, really apologetic, like he’d give me his first-born over it, and it’s not even his fault, you know?”

Peter had seemed ready to drop to his knees in supplication during his apology, his eyes pleading.

It had been weird.

Sirius’s mouth slanted. “Guess not.” He threw back the rest of his drink. “Still wish I’d shot Snape, though.”

“Well I certainly wouldn’t have complained, but it’s just as well you didn’t since we ended up needing one of them on our side.” James smoothed down the bandage and tugged his shirt over it. “Besides, I’m fine, really.”

Sirius gestured with his empty glass at James, ice cubes clinking against the sides. “When do your stitches come out?”

“Dunno. I was there when they told me but I forgot. Mum’ll remember for me.”

Sirius nodded and sat back, resting his shoulders against the side of his bed.

“Lily wanted to see the stitches, too,” James said, lifting his glass to his lips and smiling. “And she touched them. Lightly, I mean. It still hurt but I didn’t even care.”

Sirius grunted. “Not that I give a shit, but…are you two like together, then?”
James’s smile stretched wider, his whole body feeling lighter, like he could lift right off and fly. “Yeah,” he sighed contentedly. “We are.”

Sirius angled sideways to feign vomiting, including very accurate retching noises.

“Oh, come off it, Sirius. It’s this”—James sighed happily in demonstration—“or moaning that she doesn’t fancy me. And I think I know which I prefer.”

Sirius, jealous sod that he was, grumbled. But then he reached for the bottle and said, “Point taken.”

“Brilliant.” James sat up straighter, and placed his glass beside him on the rug. “If you’re on board with me talking about it, then—”

“Oh no. *No*—”

“—then let me tell you what I’ve learned so far about kissing…”

James’s stitches came out much sooner than he would have expected. The wound still throbbed for weeks after, but the pain did lessen over time. In the month after the attack, there were plenty of visits to the doctor for him, and to the barrister for Sirius.

Lily, fortunately, had no standing appointments. She had no job, no classwork, and no extracurriculars. At least, not yet. Dorcas was lobbying her to join the cricket team and really make use of her Ladybug lessons.

On the one hand, James fully supported team sport. On the other, having no commitments meant that Lily spent loads of time at the bakery. And, sometimes, in his room. With the door shut. And her mouth on his. And his mum strategically distracted because she was much too invested in this.

A Wednesday in late July found James with Lily in the bakery, his mum ardently trying to teach her how to make lavender shortbread. The sun poured in through the large picture window, flooding the kitchen with light, illuminating every fleck of flour hanging in the air.

A few swirled around Lily as she laughed.

The floral scent of lavender twined through the room, and he made a mental note to buy Lily some lavender perfume for Christmas. It would be a very grown-up gift. She would probably be dead impressed.

“Yours is so even,” Lily told him, studying his rolled-out dough. He’d pressed his out into a neat circle, unlike her admittedly lumpy and pear-shaped oval. “I’m not getting any better at this.”

“You can do it,” he said. “It’s just mind over batter.”

Lily snorted, and tried to maneuver the rolling pin to level out her dough. “D’you get the puns from your mum or your dad?”

There’d been plenty of that, too, in the last month. Questions. And, mercifully, answers.

“Certainly not from me,” Euphemia said haughtily. “This is dough, not batter, and he knows it.”

James ducked his head. “Sorry, Mum.”

“Keep your standards up, young man. You’ve a lady to impress.”
Lily shot a grin at him. “At least you don’t have to pay her each time.”

“I can’t do any more around Sirius until I break some larger notes. He refuses to give change.”

“Or you could just stop punning around him.”

“What can I say—I’m a gluten for punishment.”

“Better,” Euphemia said, while Lily let out another laugh.

“I should get a flourly rate for all the work I do around here.”

“Stop,” Lily breathed between laughs, sending another puff of flour from the counter into the air. “I’m going to get flour everywhere.”

“And I’ll still love you,” James said seriously.

Euphemia nodded. “Potters love flour-coated women.”

James took pity on Lily and moved in closer, placing his fingers over hers on the rolling pin. Dried bits of dough clung to the backs of her hands.

Among many other things, he’d learned in the last month that she was prone to burning biscuits and overmixing cake batter. That she loved snuggling up against him on the couch with a blanket over both of them as they watched cartoons. And that she made the most exquisite noises when he did a certain thing with his tongue.

“Over here,” he said, pressing down gently on the left. “See? It’s higher—look at the way the light hits it.”

“I swear it looks the same as the rest of it,” Lily said.

He shook his head, the edges of some of his hairs brushing against hers. After a month of being able to touch her freely, his heart maybe should’ve been used to this proximity. It maybe shouldn’t have thrummed so enthusiastically from something as simple as hand-touching.

And yet.

“Practice,” he said, his pulse hammering along. “You’ll get it. And if you don’t, I’ll keep being the breadwinner.”

Her body shook as she tried not to laugh, her hands clutching the rolling pin.

“You, mon minou,” she said, pulling both their sets of hands away from the dough, “are beyond belief.” She let their now-clasped hands drop in between them as she turned to face him. “Incorrigible, really. But I’ll sacrifice for the city and listen to all your ridiculous puns so no one else has to suffer.”

“Terrific,” he said with a grin. “Stupendous, in fact. Did I mention outstanding?”

“See,” she said, and leaned in toward him. “You are learning.”

His stomach definitely did not have moths or butterflies in it, but he would admit that it did, in a way, flop over. Pleasantly.

“Of course I am,” he said. “I’m a Potter.”
Her eyes were so close and so luminous as she smiled. “If only you could work on that modesty.”

She kissed him, then, even though his mum was right there hooting; even though his mouth tasted like the garlic naan they’d had with lunch; even though they really had to get the biscuits done before the dough warmed up too much and the butter started melting.

This marvelous, brave, and yes, brilliant girl had chosen him. As she well should have. Because she’d endured too much tragedy in her short life to date. More than any reasonable person would be asked to bear, really. It wasn’t fair, and it had to be rectified somehow. By someone, if the universe at large refused to do so.

Luckily for her, James was more than happy to step in. He’d make life a comedy for both of them, even if it meant playing the fool to do it.

Chapter End Notes

And that’s it! More than a year later and I can mark this project done. Thank you all so, so much for your comments and support throughout this story, especially those people who commented regularly. It's fun to write for myself, but better to know other people are enjoying things, too. :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!