

Long Live Living (If Living Can Be This)

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Long Live Living (If Living Can Be This)

by [excaliburned](#)

Summary

It's the final summer before university, and Sirius has a sneaking suspicion he's missing something. A summer of pillow-forts, drinking & numerous re-watches of Dirty Dancing ensues. Non-magical AU set in Warwick Castle.

Notes

This is a WIP but it's all finished, roughly about 50,000 words in length, so there's no danger of it being abandoned ;)

Buckets of gratitude & acknowledgement must go to professor-mcgoogles, without whom I could not have written this thing, and who is - in all things - invaluable. She is the bomb diggity, and she gave this story it's heart.

Chapter 1

“Another year, another marvellous display of drunken wisdom,” breathed Sirius Black, gazing off reverently, “What an absolute stud.”

He lifted his half-full glass of fireball whiskey in the direction of one Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore – eccentric, maverick and current Earl of Warwick, presently engaged in a bordering-on-violent game of Connect 4 with a teenager at the annual 'welcome back' party of the summer.

“Your lust for him is *tangible*, Black,” replied James – a mess of black hair, glasses and a frankly distressing attempt at stubble.

“Jealous, Potter?” Remus asked, small smile and slightly raised eyebrow and forever a mix of subtleties and almost-there's.

“Now now, my handsome bookish fellow,” James said, tapping Remus on the nose, “You know my heart belongs only to you.”

Peter snorted into his drink.

They sat at the back of the Great Hall at Warwick Castle, tucked away beside a fireplace bigger than Peter's bedroom. 18 years old and on the brink of adulthood, this was to be their final summer working at the historic castle before leaving for separate universities, separate apartments, separate lives. Separate had always been a word that didn't apply to them, but now it was like a gaudy lit up beacon on the horizon; a few bulbs missing and paired with a bright pink flamingo.

“Hey hey hey, look,” Sirius cackled, elbowing James in the ribs and gesturing over to where a lanky, dark-haired, large-nosed fellow stood brooding in the doorway.

Identical, mischevious grins appeared on the two boy's faces. “*Snivellus*,” they purred.

Remus curled a hand firmly around the back of Sirius' shirt, engendering a bewildering moment for Sirius as he tried to discern what cruel trick gravity was playing on him this time.

“James, my man,” he announced, “I appear to be stuck.”

“Gracious,” frowned James, “So you do. Oh - Lupin, end this madness! Look at that horrible, slimey bastard. He's asking for it. Stood there, all...” He gestured around wildly for a moment. “Vertical.”

“It really is quite offensive,” Peter reasoned.

Remus sighed.

“Be that as it may,” he admitted, “Dumbledore appears to be staggering in the general direction of the stage, and I really would prefer it if we didn't start the year *fi*red.”

“Speech!” Sirius exclaimed, sinking back into his chair and lighting up like a toddler in a sweet shop. He gazed upon the mad old Earl with hands clasped together in what looked like prayer - foot twitched in a tell-tale sign of excitement. This was always one of the finest moments of summer, and the momentarily sickening realization that this would be the last time they'd hear it was promptly pushed aside. It was banished to a dark and dusty corner of his brain box where all things that were too painful or awful to think about went; his family, his Maths GCSE, and the final episode of Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

“Honestly,” James began, “I think this man could pay me in speeches.”

“Don't be ridiculous, then you wouldn't be able to fund my sweet, sweet loving,” Sirius said, “Now do shut up, our Lord and Master is speaking.”

Though Sirius had every faith that James' response would have been witty and biting and shimmering with brilliance, he calmly placed a hand over his mouth before it had a chance to air.

“Lord, ladies, peasants and plebeians!” boomed Albus Dumbledore, voice echoing through the Great Hall this was his sole purpose in life. Dressed in a velvet suit of the most vibrant purple and with his long white beard tied in an plait, he seemed quite at home amongst the gargantuan portraits of preposterous nobility that lined the walls. Sirius could have swooned.

“Welcome back!”

Rapturous applause greeted his words, and James bit the palm of Sirius' strong grip to free himself and to whoop and holler and stamp his feet. Even Minerva McGonagall – manager of the gift shop, who ruled with an infamous iron fist – looked like she might even be on the brink of smiling.

“Ah, my silly little cabbages,” Albie continued, glassy-eyed with joy as he gazed around the hall, “We come to it again; a summer of false weather reports, ice cream smeared children and overpriced burgers. Oh, how you make me proud!”

Everyone in the hall laughed, and Remus leaned a little bit closer on his chair to rest his chin in his palm and smile. Sirius caught his eye and grinned.

“I want you all to remember that we work as a team in these walls, and although I wouldn't dream of putting you through any *team building exercises* -”

A tangible shudder ran through the room, and McGonagall looked tempted to vomit.

“- I must make it clear that bullying, victimising or abusing in any form Will Not Be Tolerated. I simply won't have it.”

Dumbledore cast a firm glare around the room, and Sirius could have sworn that those clear blue eyes flicked between him, James and Severus Snape more than once. He cowered

beneath the look that could switch from stern to admiring in an instant.

It switched.

“Some of you have been with us for many years,” continued the Earl, looking upon them all with the fondness of a slightly mad grandfather, “Some of you have only just begun your journey, and for some of you, this will be the end.”

(If the four boys at the back of the hall pulled their chairs slightly closer together at this, nobody mentioned it afterwards.)

“I hope you remember that fun cannot be had by our visitors if fun is not had by our workers, and that you would not have been hired did I not trust you all to handle that fun responsibly. I hope you remember that friends are to be found in all manner of places – customers, co-workers and yes, even bosses. I hope you make friends, cement friendships, hold yourselves in the highest regard - as the knights, fair maidens, queens, kings and ice cream sellers of old! And, old fool that I am, I do hope at least some of you fall in love.”

The benevolent smile he cast upon them then was returned by most, except for Sirius who pretended to retch behind Remus' chair, and James who had become somewhat distracted by the appearance of a red-haired and freckled young woman in the doorway. Sirius' retching increased twofold.

“And I shall leave it there! Join me, if you will, in a toast to our most marvellous summer yet. Nitwit, blubber, oddment, tweak!”

Fully recovered from his faux-retching fit, Sirius clapped his hand on James' shoulder as the hall erupted with applause, and the raised hands blocked Lily Evans from view. He placed a wet, sloppy kiss on his best friend's cheek and blissfully ignored the manly squeaks of protest.

“Let's do him proud, boys.”

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Super awesome artwork for this chapter from the lovely & talented Sarah:

http://30.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_lxg4m53UDs1qdessbo1_500.png

<http://sarahlaughinalonewithgoogledocs.tumblr.com/>

Mr and Mrs Potter were the most magnificent parents anybody could ever ask for. Kind, talented, friendly, forgiving and - most importantly - hardly ever home.

Sirius knew that James never felt abandoned, and imagined it was probably quite hard to since he was surrounded by so many visible signs of love and warmth (pictures on the mantelpiece, huge photo albums lovingly preserved, more books and clothes and home cooked meals than he knew what to do with). This summer the Potter parents would be absent – Mr Potter away on business, and Mrs Potter on one of her beloved “writing retreats”. Whatever that meant. Sirius had inspected the leaflet and found lots of glossy pictures of leafy trees and verbose descriptions of calm. He suspected it was right up Remus' alley.

The total lack of responsible adults gave the irresponsible boys ample opportunity to misbehave in a glorious summer of freedom. And of course, this was the Last Great Summer before university – a time to revel in boyhood, to have glorious adventures, to eat disgusting food, to drink even worse drinks, and be merry as frequently as they were hungover.

“So how's the bachelor pad going, guys?” asked Remus, leaning in the living room doorway of the Potter & Black Summer Palace.

Both boys were sat in boxers, chewing on a non descript cereal that tasted of sugar and cardboard in equal measure.

“Splendid, thank you,” replied Sirius cheerily, not taking his eyes from the episode of Gilmore Girls on the screen.

They were sat inside what Sirius would swear until his dying day was the greatest fort in all creation - but what could, by the less imaginative, be feasibly argued to resemble a rubbish heap where soft furnishings came to die. It was all a matter of perspective.

Remus raised an eyebrow.

“Jealousy doesn't suit you, mate,” James said, “Come, pull up a pew!” He patted a cushion beside him which was stained with what Sirius knew to be wine, but he mouthed 'blood' behind James' head just to watch Remus grow pale.

"I'll pass," he replied, sitting gingerly on the arm of a sofa instead. "Where're your parents again, Prongs?"

Prongs was the nickname James had acquired during fourth year, when there had been an unfortunate and alarming incident involving a fork, a pair of slippers and Peter's old playstation. The incident had been forcibly banished from their memories, but the nickname had stuck like gum to hair.

"Dad's off doing his diplomat thing," James said, shovelling cereal into his face, "And Mum's gone to some wanky retreat in Ireland to try and *find herself*."

Sirius and James wore identical expressions of distaste.

"I hate it when people try and *find themselves*," said Sirius, "How do you not know where you are? If I ever replaced any of my bits – heaven forfend - I imagine I'd find it in the shower, not Ireland."

"Profound," Remus said, and Sirius responded with a stuck out tongue and a well aimed blood-or-wine stained pillow at his head. Alas, it was all in vain, for years of living alongside Sirius at boarding school had given Remus excellent reflexes, and the pillow ended its brief aviation on a bookshelf in the corner.

"Look, get up," he continued, "Pete'll be here in a minute and you know he'll do his nut if we're late on the first day."

"McGonagall'll do it for him," James pointed out, standing up and brushing down the morning's debris of cereal and towel fluff from his legs. "Up, you lowly dog!" he said in his best impression of a Knight, and aimed a ferocious kick to Sirius' thigh.

Sirius sprang to his feet. "Aha!" he exclaimed, "You shall feel my furious wrath on the jousting field, *Godric* you terrible twat." They embarked upon a ferocious duel, index fingers acting as swords.

As they were blatantly the studs of the group, Sirius and James had managed to secure the coolest jobs the Castle had to offer. *Knights*. Every day they enacted an epic battle to the death for a crowd of young and frequently swooning admirers - Sirius as the fearsome Vlad the Impaler and James as his goody two shoes arch-enemy, Sir Godric the Brave. Sirius had offered Remus the job of being his squire, but apparently the other had decided that there was indeed such a thing as a level of humiliation too far and had refused, successfully applying for the ambiguous job of 'researcher' instead. Sirius was generally baffled and usually bored by Remus' attempts at explaining his job, but had gathered that he spent most of his time in the bowels of the castle, poring over books in search of some magical anecdote that Dumbledore could turn into a new feature for tourists. As it happened, Sirius was certain that Remus was absolutely *not* hoping for anything of the kind, as it meant he'd have to share his lovely books with others. Very occasionally Remus gave tours to people who asked for them: similar mentalists who got off on phrases like 'historical accuracy' and 'archaeological research'. It suited him just fine.

Peter, bless him, sold ice cream. And that suited him just fine, too.

A car alarm sounded outside, more akin to a constipated beast than an automobile.

“Oi oi,” Sirius said, dropping his cereal box and looking out the window.

(Like a true knight, James didn't miss the opportunity to seize the abandoned box and whack his opponent over the head with it.)

“There he is,” said Remus, “In his chariot of steel.”

Peter was the only one of them who'd actually bothered to learn to drive, and revelled quite extremely in the knowledge that here was something, *finally*, that he could do better. For his eighteenth birthday a few weeks ago the Pettigrew parents had shocked most of Southern England by buying their son a *real* car, and Pete had now taken to driving everywhere, in spite of them only living a fifteen minute walk from the Castle.

He bounded out of the rusty, rickety, red abomination with enthusiasm, observed by James, Sirius and Remus with the same kind of fondness usually reserved for a disabled puppy.

“Ladies, seriously,” Remus said in that teacher-y voice which he'd got down to a fine art after seven years of friendship, “You know he'll go spare if we don't leave now.”

“The Voice of Dull rings again,” said Sirius, heaving a long-suffering sigh, “We'd better listen, Prongs. Don't want to get beaten into submission with Shakespeare's Collected Works.”

“I have it,” Remus warned, “And I am not afraid to use it.”

“Clothes!” James announced, and dived behind one of the fort walls to emerge back up with an armful of jeans and t-shirts for them both. A quick sniff and shrug deemed them to be at an acceptable level of clean, and Sirius decided it best not to question.

“Hellooooo!” Peter called, letting himself in to the house and spinning his car keys *very* subtly on his finger.

Peter's definition of subtle was about the same level of accurate as James' definition of clean.

All cheeriness dissipated as soon as he saw that Sirius and James were gallivanting about over their fort in their boxers; furious battle having recommenced in the split-second that Remus was foolish to have his back turned.

“No no no, men! No! Come on! We have to go! First day, first day! McGonagall will rip my face off, you know she will,” Peter appealed, flailing slightly, “Remember last year? Mm?”

“I do,” Remus muttered darkly.

“Nope,” Sirius smiled, “Can't imagine anything but sweet nothings and willing adoration from the mouth of my lovely Minnie.” He took a moment to gaze distantly upwards as if remembering some long lost coital embrace of the past; a moment in which James squealed a tribal cry, throwing himself upon Sirius' back.

“Victoryyyyy!” he declared, “Conquest! Domination! Triumph!”

“Nooooo,” Sirius whined, kicking his legs ineffectively underneath James' surprisingly strong thighs, “Nooo, Peter, this is all your fault! Traitor! How could you?! You should have died – *died* rather than betray your friend!”

“Drama queen,” said James.

“Do come *on*,” Remus urged in characteristic exasperation, “Clothes, boys, clothes! They are your *friends*, I promise, which McGonagall will certainly not be if we're late. And, you know, Pete looks a bit like he might wet himself so unless you want to add *that* to the state of this place..”

“I can only assume that by *place* you mean *palace*,” Sirius corrected, but he was – gah, cruel world – pulling on jeans.

Remus smirked. “Dangerous assumption, Black,” he said, “Now let's *go*.”

“Keep your knickers on, Moony,” James said, pulling a t-shirt on over his head and grinning at the face that Remus pulled at that nickname. He'd gained it when he'd been dared into getting his ass out on a trip to Paris in second year, and had somehow never managed to live down. Obviously Sirius' bathroom graffiti hadn't exactly *helped*...

“You are a cruel man,” Remus stated, “And you shall suffer when the revolution comes.”

James took a bow, stepping into scuffed up trainers without undoing the laces.

Peter bounced anxiously on the balls of his feet and checked his watch approximately every four seconds. “Pleeeeeease,” he whimpered.

“Honestly,” Sirius said, all of a sudden completely dressed, “I wish you two would just sort yourselves out on time.” He swung his arm around James' shoulders with boyish ease and cast disapproving glances at Remus and Peter. “The cheek of it, really.”

“It's a fucking disgrace,” James added, shaking his head and stalking out the front door with Sirius.

“Ah, shit, have to put my shoes on – wait!” Remus called out after them, and Sirius cackled merrily as Peter had a very small and very quiet fit.

“Hey, do you know who the Princess in the Tower is this year?” asked Sirius, pulling his chain mail on and inwardly cursing its weight to the deepest and fieriest caverns of hell.

“Is it Evans?!” James asked, head snapping up from lacing his boots so quickly that Sirius feared for brain damage. Or, well. Further damage.

He nodded gravely. “And you know who her footman thing-ma-bob is..”

James' eyes became huge, bespectacled saucers on his head. “Oh, no...” he whined, “Oh, say it isn't so, Sirius.”

“I'm afraid it is so,” said Sirius, “*Snivellus*.”

James' fist landed on the wall.

“That conniving little shit,” he growled.

From the makeshift stable where they changed, James looked up to where the tallest tower stood steadfast and impressive in the distance. Sirius could almost see the rusty little cogs in James' brain turning as he tried to decide exactly how bad it would be to push a man from there...

“Probably a bit too early in the summer for murder?” he asked, sounding a little disappointed with himself. That was James' problem; he was always letting his pesky ideas about 'morals' stand in the way of some truly marvellous mischief.

Sirius sighed, but relented.

“Perhaps,” he agreed, “You know I've always appreciated your penchant for timing.”

And speaking of timing; a trumpet sounded loudly outside, signalling the start of Sirius and James' first performance of the summer. Sirius' face cracked into a grin and knew without looking that James would be wearing it too – performing gave them a kind of exhilaration usually only experienced by pranks, or by 'experimenting' with Sirius' battered second hand motorbike which he'd lovingly nicknamed Bessy.

Sirius swung himself up onto saddle of his horse – a great big black thing with terrifying hooves that he'd dubbed Darth Vader upon sight. He privately referred to James' dainty white mare as Skywalker, though James had decided – sickeningly – to call it *Lily*. Any horse-face jokes were always swiftly cut down by an alarmingly forceful kick to the shin. He was nothing if not reliable.

“Once more unto the brink, old chap?” asked Sirius.

“Indeed,” James said, pulling the visor of his helmet down over his eyes.

“Have I ever told you how pretty you look like that?”

“Die.”

They returned to the stable forty minutes later: sweaty; exhilarated; bruised.

“We must learn to work off some of this tension in the bedroom, Black,” said James, rubbing ointment on to a particularly nasty looking purple bloom on his shoulder, “It's getting embarrassing.”

“Embarrassing for *you*,” said Sirius, “I kicked your scrawny little arse out th- oh, *hello*.”

One of his very favourite things about being paid to spend the day as a dashing and daring Knight was, without a shadow of a doubt, the *ladies*. The four boys had been working at Warwick Castle for a while now – this was their third summer – and had managed to assemble a little gaggle of girls known by James and Sirius as the Black/Potter Fancub, which Peter felt was alienating, and which Remus suspected was a little racist.

Pushing his shaggy black hair off his face, Sirius' face melted into a sideways grin, and he leant on the frame of the doorway with arms folded across his chain mail clad chest. He knew precisely what he was doing.

“What can I do for you, ladies?” he purred, raising an eyebrow and positively bathing in the giggles that simple movement elicited.

A curly haired blonde cleared her throat and stepped forwards a little, tucking her hair behind her ear. “We were just wondering what you guys are doing later on?” she asked, and Sirius mentally applauded her bravery. It must be terrifying, he reasoned, to approach such strapping young men.

“Oh, pretty thing,” Sirius sighed. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed James squinting at a redhead in the back, as if trying to discern whether or not he could stoop so low. Sirius resisted the urge to inform him solemnly that he could stoop no lower, and ploughed on. “Being knights of the realm we’ve got a busy evening of chivalry ahead of us, of course!”

The girl pouted softly, looking up at him through her eyelashes. “You couldn't be chivalrous with us..?” she asked, and when Sirius shook his head her eyes flicked back to James. “What about your friend?” she asked, and Sirius gave a loud bark of laughter.

“No chance there, my darlings,” he told them sadly, with the air of a doctor delivering very bad news, “He's in *love*.”

If every other word was honey on his tongue then that word was something seriously bitter, but to his horror all the girls “aww”d at James, who perked up considerably.

“You're sure you don't wanna hang out with us?” the blonde girl pressed, but before Sirius had a chance to respond Peter bounded into the midst, licking a messy looking ice cream and blinking at the girls.

“Who are we hanging out with?” he asked eagerly, but Sirius reached out and wrenched Peter into the stable before the girls had time to pounce upon him, though never before would they have had such a willing pounce-ee.

“James' parents,” Sirius said quickly, putting his arm around Peter's shoulder and digging his nails in beneath the peasant uniform.

“Ow!” said Peter, frowning and taking another lick of his ice cream – presumably for solace in this time of strife, “What are you on about? His parents are aw-”

“-A wonderful set of people! Yes, yes, you're quite right Pettigrew, though I do wish you wouldn't fawn so. So it's a pity that we can't spend the evening with these lovely ladies, *isn't it?* Because we're terribly busy, *aren't we?*”

James was edging closer to the red head at the back, who looked as if she couldn't decide whether to be delighted or alarmed by his slow approach. Sirius elbowed Peter in the ribs; they had limited time to avoid disaster.

“Oh! Yes, terribly busy,” Peter sighed, gazing longingly at the blonde who was definitely not having the same dilemma as her red-headed friend. There was nothing but mild alarm on her small features. “Doing... Busy things. You know how it is.”

Sirius nodded his approval. There were some things you could always count on Peter for, and cock blocking when cock blocking was necessary was one of them.

Though the girl still looked more than a little unconvinced, Sirius smiled brightly, clapped Peter on the back in hearty approval and reached out to seize James away from further advancement. He blinked and staggered, but then mostly just looked relieved.

“Well, bye then,” said Sirius, waving to the disappointed gaggle of fans, “Do come back tomorrow – you never know!”

“What did you say your name was?” Peter asked, voice slightly higher than usual and tinged with perhaps just a dash of desperation.

“I didn't,” said the curly haired blonde, “It's Marlene – Marlene McKinnon.”

She smiled warmly, let her eyes trail along Sirius' torso – violation! Control yourselves, ladies! - and turned to accompany her friends as they left.

Sirius gave a whole-body shudder, turning back round to face his friends.

“Awful,” he said, “Bloody awful specimen. As if I'd ever shag anyone called *Marlene*.”

“You are so cruel to them, Sirius,” Peter observed, offering Darth Vader the remnants of his ice cream cone.

“Eh,” Sirius shrugged, “I think they like it.”

James pulled his t-shirt on over his head, took out his contacts and replaced them with glasses, and slumped dramatically onto a haystack.

“Thanks for the save, lads,” he said, “Must stop mistaking every ginger for Evans.”

“...And then bringing them home for a shag, accidentally calling them Lily, having a horribly messy break up in which you ask 'why – won't – she – love – me' in that dry sob that is so very becoming of you,” Sirius continued, “And I am left to scrape you up off the floor. Believe me when I say in all earnest, mate; you're welcome.”

James rolled his eyes and tossed a handful of hay pathetically in Sirius' general direction. "What're you doing here anyway, Pete?" he asked, as Sirius picked up the hay and fed it to Darth Vader, cooing all the while.

"Hiding," admitted Peter, "McGonagall said *she wanted to talk to me.*"

The three boys shuddered in perfect unison, even Skywalker/Lily looked a little spooked.

Darth Vader was of course a fearsome beast and chewed at his hay, unperturbed.

"Fair," James said, and Sirius nodded in agreement.

He finished cooing over Darth Vader and kissed him on the nose. "Right," he said, blissfully ignorant of James' look of utter disgust, "I'm off to see our little Moony. Somebody needs to save him from the books lest he succumb to temptation and elope with them in tow. Perhaps I need to save the books from him... Anyway! James, defend our man with your life."

James placed a firm hand on Peter's shoulder, who pretended to quiver with fear.

"Beautiful," Sirius breathed, gazing at them like a general sending his men into certain doom. "You brave, brave men. Goodbye!"

And he bounded off in search of chocolate wrappers and dusty books and cold cups of tea; all indicating to the whereabouts of one Remus John Lupin.

Chapter 3

Where u at home brotha?

Sirius Black to Remus Lupin, 12.31p.m.

At work, “dawg”. An unfamiliar concept to you I am sure. Leave me alone.

Remus Lupin to Sirius Black, 12.33p.m.

No chance. U in office or library?

Sirius Black to Remus Lupin, 12.33p.m.

Office. Planning a tour. DO NOT COME HERE.

Remus Lupin to Sirius Black, 12.34p.m.

I have chocolate.....

Sent from Sirius Black to Remus Lupin, 12.35p.m.

...Come here.

Remus Lupin to Sirius Black, 12.35p.m.

“I lied,” said Sirius, bounding into Remus' cluttered little office like a well-dressed hurricane. “I am sans chocolate.”

Remus sighed, not looking up from his laptop.

“I knew it,” he said, “You've never been anything but a disappointment to me, Black.”

Sirius sat down in the chair opposite Remus' desk and promptly put his feet up on the table. Sitting opposite somebody at a desk always made him feel like he was back at school, and putting his feet up reminded him he wasn't. Also, the look of abject terror on Remus' face as he edged his toes closer to the precariously stacked pile of historical manuscripts was just too good to pass up.

“Don't!” Remus shrieked as the mingling of socks and sentences became too much, and Sirius cackled mercilessly.

“Ah, calm your tits,” he grinned, moving his feet back to a safe and secure position and plucking an apple from the desk. Remus narrowed his eyes at him as he bit into it.

“A tour, eh?” he asked, and Remus nodded. He saved his document (for what Sirius was sure was the eighty ninth time) and closed the lid of his computer.

“Yep,” Remus replied, “One of those fancy moving things people attend when they want to Learn Stuff. It's like school, except standing.”

“Pointless,” declared Sirius, taking another unseemly large bite, “Part of school's only joy was resting ones firm, manly buttocks on a downy pillow all day.”

“After too much use the night before?” Remus muttered wryly, quirking an eyebrow at Sirius who narrowed his eyes and pointed an accusative finger at him in return.

“Filth, Moony,” he said, “Utter filth. Stop imagining it; I thought we cleared the air when you finally got the balls to tell the world the glaringly obvious.”

Remus had told the others he was gay in Year 10, when they were all fifteen, and had been met with amused bewilderment from his friends until they had taken a second to consider it and had mutually concluded that it actually made a great deal of sense. It had pretty much remained between them until Sirius had gone and been a total dick a few weeks later and had accidentally let it slip to Snape – of all people, of *all fucking people* – who had of course tormented Remus mercilessly about it until James gave in and punched him squarely in the nose. He'd punched Sirius in the nose too, and it remained the only time in his life he'd felt he deserved it.

“Can't help it,” Remus sighed, “My raging homosexuality makes it a struggle to keep my hands off you *every single day*.”

Sirius shrugged. “Well, you're only human. Come on, I want tea and I want scones and I do not necessarily want them in that order.”

“Still got a bit of snob in you, yeah?”

He smiled. “Little bit.”

“*Ohh* I do like jam,” Sirius purred, spraying Remus with a mouthful of scone crumbs, “I do like it I do.”

“I can tell,” replied Remus, “You're looking at it like it's about to do terribly emasculating things with you.”

“I wish it *would*. ”

“Oh, really, Sirius? Even condiments aren't safe from you any more?”

“Ain't nobody safe from me,” Sirius said, smugly.

Remus frowned, but he looked amused. “Creepy.”

Sirius shrugged. “Baby, I was born this way.”

“Did you just quote Gaga at me?” Remus asked, eyebrows raised.

“Maybe? I'm not entirely sure who that is,” admitted Sirius, swallowing down his mouthful of jam-slathered scone and stirring his fourth sugar into his tea. He chose to ignore the look

of utter disgust that Remus gave him at this.

“Well,” Remus said, “Just don't ever call me baby again.”

Sirius grinned. “Baby, baby, baby,” he said in a faux Southern drawl, and Remus flailed his hands around as if he were trying to bat the words out of the air.

They were sat in the public café of the Castle; Sirius generally eschewed the staff room in favour of this place because the waitresses fancied him and the scones were better (which were his two main criteria for enjoyable places). He always dragged Remus over to the big, wooden table by the window, which really looked more like a sleigh than anything else, and which provided a brilliant view over the castle grounds into the city and countryside beyond.

“We should go to Stratford this afternoon!” he proposed suddenly, getting that wicked gleam of excitement in his eye that inevitably indicated mischief.

Remus visibly perked up at this suggestion. Stratford-upon-Avon wasn't far from Warwick and if they stole (or rather, *borrowed*) Peter's car they could be there in about an hour – it was a haven of all things Shakespearean and quaint, so obviously Remus positively wet himself every time they went. Sirius didn't often suggest they go, but he'd been spending so much time with James that he'd been missing his Moony lately, and he always rather enjoyed the look of mingled enjoyment and confusion on Remus' face when he revealed his wealth of Shakespearean know-how.

(Very often this 'wealth of Shakespearean know-how' consisted mainly of whatever was written on the signs behind Remus' head wherever they were, but if Remus ever caught on to this, he seemed happy to keep up the façade.)

Remus slumped down just as quickly as he'd perked up. “I can't,” he said miserably, “I told you, I have to give a tour this afternoon. And also, you know... This is *work* , Sirius.”

Sirius stuck out his bottom lip and frowned in an alarmingly accurate impression of a toddler on the verge of a tantrum. Remus immediately picked up what remained of his own scone and put it on Sirius' plate – after seven years, he was well-practised in these pre-emptive strikes.

Placated, Sirius put it in his mouth, leant back in his chair, and sighed.

“Oh well,” he said, “Nobody else appreciates my literary mind quite like you. Perhaps I shall have to take Prongs?”

“Oh, because that went so well last time,” Remus pointed out. He had been the first one to drag them all off to Stratford in the holidays, and it remained the only time that James had visited. “As I recall he spent most of the day confusing Shakespeare with Sherlock Holmes, until you finally dragged him off to terrorize the swans with you.”

“Ah, memories,” said Sirius, wistfully. He downed the last dregs of his tea – which by this point was just warm liquid sugar. “Another time, then. Whose minds are you blowing with your riveting historical tales today?”

“Some bloke called Matthew,” Remus replied, “Matthew Adamson, do you remember him? He worked here when we were fourteen and he was – I don't know, I suppose about our age. I think he had your job.”

“Oh yeeeeeah,” Sirius said, then paused to narrow his eyes slightly at Remus, “Didn't you fancy him a bit?”

Remus snorted, but the tips of his ears were pink. “Sirius, I was *fourteen*,” he said, “Still trying to figure out if I liked girls, boys, or a mixture of both.”

“I've always thought you should go with both,” said Sirius, “Keep your options open, you know?”

“Your contributions are always so helpful,” Remus remarked, and Sirius nodded.

“What's he doing back here then, anyway?” he asked.

“He's doing a Masters at the university now,” explained Remus, “And the Castle's got something to do with it, I think. It's not really a big deal – he'll probably know way more about it than I do and I'll just end up sounding really stupid -”

“Remus,” Sirius interrupted, “Nobody on this Earth knows more about useless, boring, old crap than you. I promise you that. I'll have it written on your grave.”

Remus laughed, and the corners of his eyes crinkled up like paper. It was pretty endearing.

“Ah, Sirius,” he sighed, “How you woo me.”

Chapter 4

“*Again?*” asked Sirius, incredulously, “Holy shit Moony, is there a person alive in the world who loves this decrepit place as much as you?!”

“So it would seem,” replied Remus.

It was the third time this week that Remus was to give Matthew a tour around the Castle for his university project, and since it was starting to impinge upon their tea and scone time, Sirius was starting to object. He couldn't quite place it, but there was something a little unnerving about Remus going off and cantering around the Castle with somebody they hadn't ever really met. *He* was the most skilled at cantering. His cantering skills were well acknowledged. Surely Remus knew that.

Remus stood up from his desk and brushed the morning's biscuit debris off his trousers. Apparently somewhere in the past week he had acquired a small mirror, unbeknownst to Sirius, in which he was now inspecting his reflection with the air of all those used to looking at their reflection and simply deciding that it wasn't going to get any better. Sirius frowned.

“Remus, are you *preening?*” he demanded, “You look like Potter, man, what the shit are you doing?”

Remus scowled and looked flustered, shoving the mirror violently to the back of his top drawer and tugging down the hem of his dark grey jumper. “Oh – just – I don't – bloody leave me alone, Sirius,” he muttered, though as usual his request to be abandoned came without any real force.

Realization dawned upon Sirius like a very slow wave.

“Remus...” he said, slowly, as the surf broke over his brain, “Do you *like* this fellow?”

“What?!” Remus yelped, dropping his papers, “No – God – what are you – don't be ridiculous, Sirius, please. I – no. *No.*”

Sirius tipped back in his chair, using his feet as leverage on the desk. “So that's a yes, then?” he said.

Remus looked at him with that typical Remus expression that only he could pull off – a half smile; a bitten lip; a furrowed eyebrow; a vaguely worried look in his eye. He sighed.

“Fine!” he scowled, “Fine. *Fine.* Oh, shitting balls and bollocking hell, why must you do this to me? Please – just, don't mention anything to James or Peter, will you?”

Sirius tapped his index finger to his chin, thoughtfully.

“Well,” he said, “This *is* an interesting development.”

Interesting was certainly an apt word. Sirius wasn't quite sure what to make of it – Remus had always been so completely and utterly *single* that he'd genuinely begun to believe his friend might have absolutely no inclinations whatsoever, no matter how much he fawned over Swayze whenever they watched Dirty Dancing (which was probably more than most groups of 18 year old boys had, but still significantly less than any number Sirius might deem 'too much'). But hell, that was normal – even Sirius fawned over him, and Sirius fawned over *no-one*. The point was, he didn't know what to think. The overwhelming emotion was predictably one of concern for his friend's well-being, but there was a hefty dose of surprise mixed in there too. To be totally honest, mostly he just felt oddly sick. Hmm, he thought to himself, eloquently. Definitely something to be considered later; and he hid it away in his 'To Be Dealt With At A Later Date' file, which he noted with vague bemusement was beginning to bulge somewhat at the sides.

“Honestly, Sirius, please don't make this a big deal out of this,” Remus asked, looking at him earnestly, “It's – nothing will happen, really. I'm pretty sure he thinks my name's Richard and I'm not exactly going to correct him. Really – it's nothing.”

Sirius looked at him with an expression of fond sadness that he usually only reserved for James on one of his half-hourly tirades about the pain of unrequited love. “Oh, but this is *something*,” he insisted, “For it means you are finally a man.” He stood up and clapped Remus on the shoulder. “I thought it'd be you and me until the end of time, Moony, but it seems I shall have to run away and live the life of a bachelor with Peter. It's not ideal, but I suppose it'll have to do.”

Remus smiled at him gratefully. “I'm sorry,” he said, and though it was mostly light-hearted there was a little something in his eyes that suggested, perhaps, a grain of sincerity. “I promise I'll never be like James.”

“And for that, my dear,” said Sirius, “I am eternally grateful.”

“We've lost him!” Sirius wailed, flinging himself dramatically onto a haystack. “He has joined the ranks of the lovelorn wankers. Oh, woe is me! I am woe!”

“Who?” asked Peter, looking up from the corner of James and Sirius' stable. He hid there a lot, these days.

“Remus,” said Sirius, wrenching the name out of his throat as if it physically pained him to speak, “Remus Traitor Lupin, as he shall henceforth be known.” He sat up, looking over at Peter with shining eyes and a wobbling bottom lip. “Promise you'll never leave me, Wormtail?”

“I promise,” Peter replied solemnly, “But I still don't like that nickname.”

“You came up with it, mate,” James pointed out.

“I didn't *mean* to!”

When they first met, the four boys had ended up in a slanging match where they all tried to come up with the best insults. “Knob jockey!”, James had cried, “Arse bandit!”, Sirius had replied, “Monkey lover!”, was Remus' contribution, and then Peter – tiny, bewildered, and clearly struggling – had given them “W-w-worm... Tail!!”. Naturally, it had stuck.

Sirius laughed at the memory, then remembered he was mourning and slumped promptly back into grief.

“So he's gone and found some bloke then, has he?” asked James.

“Yep,” Sirius sighed, “And they're going to get married and move to Barbados and adopt lots of small children and name them after books. It is *horrendous*.”

“It sounds it,” agreed James, “Well, that is a surprise, anyway. I always thought...”

He trailed vaguely off, looking at Sirius as if he'd momentarily forgotten that Sirius could see him staring. Sirius blinked, and raised his hands expectantly.

“What?” he asked, and James emerged back into consciousness.

“Oh, nothing,” he said. He shrugged.

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Honestly, mate, it's a miracle Evans hasn't snapped you up - intelligent and aware as you are,” he said, fully expecting the two finger salute he received in response. “Well, anyway, Prongs' ineptitude aside – what are we going to *do*, men?”

“Sabotage?” offered Peter.

Sirius pointed at him. “Yes,” he agreed, vehemently, “I like the way you think, Pettigrew. I like the cut of your jib.”

“No,” said James, firmly. He looked sternly between the two of them, and Peter visibly quavered under his gaze. Sirius rolled his eyes. No backbone, that one.

“But -” he protested, and James wheeled around to him with a face set like stone.

“No,” he repeated, “I swear Black, if you piss all over this I will *wear your skin*.”

A grin twitched on Sirius' face. “Is that your new technique for wooing Lily?” he asked, and was awarded another two fingered salute for his hilariously biting wit.

“I mean it,” James said, and Sirius scowled.

“*Fine*,” he sighed, “Fun sponge.”

James continued to frown, but seemed momentarily satisfied.

“It is a bit weird though, isn't it?” Sirius then put forth, hesitantly.

Peter looked over at James – something he usually did before forming an opinion. “I think it's – good?” he tried, blinking at James for approval.

James nodded, and Peter visibly relaxed. “It's good,” he decided, and when James Potter passed judgement in their group, it was basically Law.

Sirius pouted.

“Oh, come on,” James said, rolling his eyes, “You honestly don't think it's good?”

He shrugged, folding his arms over his chest. “Yeah,” he admitted grudgingly, “I guess it's good.”

But, for the life of him, he really couldn't figure out why he didn't totally mean that.

The first time Sirius met Matthew was two days later. He was in the Castle *again* – was he ever *not* in the Castle these days? - but, shockingly, it wasn't actually for another of one of Remus' spectacular tours.

Sirius hated him on sight.

He was good looking, Sirius observed, if you liked that sort of thing (i.e., handsome). Curly brown hair and big green eyes, edging around the 5'10” mark and with a far better display of stubble than James Potter could ever dream of. Personally, Sirius felt that Remus would be better suited to men with flawless dark hair and cheekbones that could slice a man in two, but this was just his personal opinion. Matthew wore glasses, Sirius noted with an internal sigh, knowing Remus' weakness for them. Bloody hispter. Bloody shifted-eye-sighted hipster. Bloody... Bloody *bastard*.

He'd been sitting on the fence that surrounded the river, minding his own business and throwing scraps of bread roll to the ducks of whom he was so fond, when he caught sight of this attractive young man heading towards him. He definitely had that 'scruffy student' thing going on – battered converse, quirky sweater, untucked shirt in a neutral colour. Immediately recognizing who it was, Sirius tugged at the hem of his plain black t-shirt self consciously. He could *totally* do the scruffy student thing. *Totally*. You know, if he wanted to.

“Sirius?” Matthew asked, standing by the fence and shielding his eyes from what Sirius could only assume was his dazzling good looks and not, in fact, the bright midday sun.

“Yeah?” Sirius said, swinging his legs around the fence and hopping off. “Are you Matthew?”

Matthew looked slightly surprised. “Yeah, I am,” he replied, sounding both suspicious and amused, “How did you know?”

Inner Sirius flailed about a little in momentary panic – he didn't want to give the game away that Remus had started mentioning Matthew in conversation a little more than was strictly necessary. Remus would never be the kind of guy to start talking about nothing but his crush

– thank *God* for that – but although Sirius wasn't sure if the word 'crush' had ever even entered Remus' vocabulary, Matthew's name had been there increasingly. It was just little things – like they'd go and get a pasty for lunch and Remus would point out which one was Matthew's favourite, and how maybe he should give it a go, until Sirius had shaken him firmly by the shoulders and reminded him that cheese and pastry was an ungodly combination, and “for God's sake get some beef in you man, locked down in that library all day you're getting so skinny you're starting to look like Robert Pattinson”.

“Just -” Sirius began, “Remus has mentioned you once or twice so I... Guessed.”

Yep. Lucky guess. Definitely nothing to do with facebook stalking at *all*.

“He has?” Matthew asked, visibly perking up.

“Well, *obviously*, you go on his tours, like, *constantly*,” Sirius replied, leaning against the fence and doing his best to look artfully dishevelled and desperately handsome.

It might have been a remnant of his days as heir to Black dynasty, but for some reason whenever he was around new people – men, in particular – he became terribly haughty, and his voice became just that little bit more clipped. He didn't *actually* think he was above anybody (James having knocked some serious sense into him around about the fourth week of their living together in school) but he knew full well that he still retained the ability to make it seem as if he thought that. And he wasn't afraid to use it.

Matthew didn't seem particularly phased – in fact, he still seemed to be a little bit delighted that Remus had mentioned him.

“Well,” he said, grinning bashfully at Sirius, “They are *very* good tours.”

He winked at Sirius knowingly, and Sirius just frowned, bewildered.

“I don't know to respond to that,” he said simply, because he didn't. Was Matthew trying to share some kind of 'wink-wink-nudge-nudge-say-no-more' with Sirius... About *Remus*?

Immediately he realized his mistake, and held up his hands. “Oh, sorry mate,” said Matthew, “The way he talks about you I thought there might have been a thing there once..?”

This time it was not inner Sirius who flailed, but outer. He widened his eyes and flapped his hands about inanely for a second. “No chance!” he said, “No – Jesus – are you mental? No. No. It'd be like snogging...”

Sirius paused for a second, wondering who exactly it would be like snogging. He couldn't come up with an appropriate response – his mind went mysteriously blank at the thought of snogging Remus, so he just went for his default answer to signify disgust.

“...*James*,” he decided, and there at least was a thought which would *definitely* make him shudder.

Matthew laughed, nervously. “Oh, right,” he said, breathlessly, “Well... Okay then.”

“Sorry,” Sirius said, scratching the back of his neck on awkward impulse. “Sorry – I mean, I’m sure he’d be a *lovely* snog – I mean, you know, not for me personally, I’m straight as an arrow – well except for that one time in year 9 where we played spin the bottle and I had to kiss Arthur Weasley and it was pretty gross but, you know, worse things have happened at sea and that so, well, whatever floats your boat -”

He stopped himself – for which Matthew looked very grateful – and sighed.

“What do you want?” he asked, deciding to simply plough through the awkward with the characteristic bluntness for which he was famed. Matthew looked even more grateful for that.

“Right,” began Matthew, “Well, basically, I was wondering if... Well, if you thought Remus might want to go out with me sometime? And – er, more than that, what I should, you know... *Do*, with him?”

Sirius opened his mouth to respond, then closed it and took a second to consider his choices. His instinct – that awful little demon shaped creature that bounced around the back of his brain and chose the most inappropriate times to appear – screamed at him to seize this moment with both hands and send Matthew running for the hills as if Remus had come down bubonic plague. Which, really – the demon shaped creature reasoned – he might be, what with all those ancient texts and germs of old. Sadly that instinct was firmly silenced by the floating head of James Potter appearing in his mind’s eye and firmly saying “*No*”. He felt his instinct deflate and admit defeat, skulking back to the shadowy corners from whence it came.

He sighed.

“Do I think he’d go out with you?” he asked, and Matthew nodded. Sirius took a second to consider this – which he didn’t actually need, just to wanted to watch him squirm - and then nodded too. The grin that cracked across Matthew’s face then was, Sirius hated to admit, a little bit adorable. Horrible, adorable bastard.

“Where should I take him?” he asked, “Like – what should we do? I thought I’d come and ask you because he always talks about how much fun you are and how much fun you have together and stuff. I just want to have... Fun!”

“Hang on,” Sirius said, becoming stern as Matthew mentioned the word ‘fun’ one too many times. He held up a finger and prodded him firmly in the chest with it. “Are you or are you not simply interested in having *fun* with Remus? Because I have had my fair share of *fun* with, frankly, more than my fair share of people, Matthew my lad, and I know *exactly* what that means. And that is not what Remus wants *or* deserves.”

Matthew immediately looked panicked, and Sirius silently revelled in the look of abject horror on his face as he tried to back track. “No no no!” he exclaimed, “No – God, no, I don’t *just* want – I mean I wouldn’t say *no* – but that’s, ah, God, that’s not what I want at *all*!”

Sirius cackled, and merrily clapped Matthew on the shoulder. “Ahh, I’m just messing with you buddy,” he said, eyes lighting up, “I know you wouldn’t do that to him. Anyway, you’d be mental to, because I’d smash your fucking face in.”

He still spoke with a light-hearted tone, but there was a gravitas to his final sentence that made it very clear he wasn't *totally* kidding around. James would have approved of that level of intimidation. It was very James.

Matthew looked like he couldn't decide whether to be scared or delighted, and so settled for nervous laughter. It was probably the safest bet.

“So, an ideal date for Remus, eh?” Sirius mused, sitting back on the fence and tapping his chin.

In that moment he decided why he'd been feeling so weird about the whole affair up until this point – partly because he didn't want another of his mates to fall down into the black and bottomless cavern of love, of course, but also because he was protective of Remus. Of course he was! He couldn't believe he hadn't figured it out before – it was just good old fashioned protectiveness of his friend. And now that he had an opportunity to secure Remus' well-being, there was no reason to ever feel weird about this whole affair again. Lovely jubbly.

Satisfied with this conclusion, he suppressed the urge to go home and eat an entire vat of chocolate ice cream and watch Dirty Dancing. Again.

He clapped his hands together and looked at Matthew in the same way he looked at James when they were about to do something particularly brilliant.

“Right,” he began, “So, first...”

Chapter 5

“Whyyyy,” James groaned, a curled up shape beneath a mass of blankets. “Whyyyy do you do this to me. Whyyy.”

“Because,” Sirius began, “You leave me with no choice. Up, comrade, up!”

He bent down and seized hold of the James Potter shape, and shook it roughly.

“Your brothers in arms need you! We neeeeed you!” Sirius yelled, as James protested and whined and yelped, “Peter – back me up!”

“We neeeeed you!” he echoed half-heartedly, sitting on the couch and giving most of his attention to the episode of *Gilmore Girls* on the screen.

Sirius scowled but, hell. He couldn't blame him. That show was genius.

“Except I don't really need you,” added Peter, “Because I can't come. *Some* of us are at the mercy of the Ice Queen, and don't get a day off *whenever we feel like it*.”

“It's a Saturday, Pettigrew,” Sirius replied, now sitting on James on the off chance that this would somehow speed *up* the process of getting him to stand, “We always have Saturdays off!”

Peter stuck out his bottom lip. “*You* always have Saturdays off,” he retorted, “*I* always have to cover somebody else's shift.” He sighed, tucking his legs underneath him and turning the volume up on the TV to drown out James' screams. “Forever alone.”

“Ignore Wormtail,” Sirius ordered, beginning to dig through the layers of blanket to uncover the Potter within, “Our Moony needs us. Aha, there you are! I've got you now, you tricky swine.”

“He's your bloody Moony, not mine,” James muttered, rubbing his eyes whilst simultaneously attempting to beat Sirius away.

“Well I don't even know what that means,” Sirius said cheerfully, “But look, look you're out of your blankets! I'm so proud! Now come on darling, baby steps, up we get...”

He seized James by the wrists and attempted to pull him to his feet, but only succeeded in dragging him slightly further along the floor. James was not a very co-operative man in the mornings.

“Stop screaming at me,” he whimpered, cradling his head in his hands and pouting as Sirius continued to drag him around the living room floor.

“You,” Sirius decided, “Are *pathetic*. I really don't know if I can continue to be friends with such a girly wanker. You had *four beers*! *Four*!”

James looked up at him, aghast, and Peter laughed in the background. “You *lie!*” he declared, pointing an accusative finger at his friend, “Four beers, and *two* rum and cokes, and *five* shots of sambuca, and whatever the *hell* was in that dirty pint you made me drink -”

Sirius smiled blissfully at the memory.

“-And that's the last thing I remember, so God only knows what happened after that.”

“Did you guys go out last night?” asked Peter, looking downcast.

“No!” James exclaimed, hysterically, “We did not even leave the house – just got wasted in our jammies!”

“Best place to get wasted,” Sirius said, “And we did leave the house – at one point you tried to climb on the roof.”

James chucked a pillow violently at his head. “Irrelevant!” he said, “You made me watch Dirty Dancing. *Twice.*”

Sirius gasped, eyes widening, as Peter's laughter increased. “I did *not*,” he insisted, throwing the pillow back, “The second time was only the special features!”

“Oh, well that makes it all right then, I suppose!” James spat, taking the pillow and hugging it to his chest. The weapon became a shield. “Never again, Black, *never again*. I swear, if I have to listen to that fucking Time of My Life song again -”

“Oi,” said Sirius, “That is a *classic*. That is a musical *marvel*. And I know you know all the words – I was there last night!”

“Only because you made me listen to it *eighteen times!*”

“Well I didn't *make* you come up with a Time of My Life *rap!*”

“I had to redeem my street cred somehow!”

“Mate, I promise you, that was *not* the way.”

Peter cleared his throat. “Well,” he said brightly, “I have to go to work. I hope you to hash this out calmly and with as little bloodshed as possible, but I suspect I hope in vain. Till tomorrow, gents.”

Sirius leapt on James and tackled him to the floor, but James was laughing as he attempted to push Sirius off. Perhaps the bloodshed could wait for another day, then.

“Give McGonagall my love!” yelled James, and Peter saluted him before heading out the front door.

Sirius stopped James' struggling with a firm hand in the centre of his chest, and suddenly became very still like a dog listening out for signs of his quarry.

“One...” he said, as the car struggled to start outside.

“Two...” It tried to start again, and fizzled out once more.

“Three...” For the third time the car struggled to start, and then... Success! It roared into life like an ancient lion deciding to give it one more go, and both James and Sirius applauded as Peter careened it off down the road.

James shoved Sirius off of him, and he landed with an 'oof' next to the TV.

“Wherever we're going,” James said, warningly, “It better have bacon sandwiches involved.”

Sirius grinned. “I'll see what I can do,” he said.

“I love you, mate,” said James, around a mouthful of the greasiest and most delicious looking bacon sandwich the world had ever seen. “I bloody *love* you.”

“Shh!” Sirius demanded, pressing a finger to his lips and looking at the door, “They'll be here in a second!”

When he'd been talking to Matthew, Sirius had ummed and ahhed for a long time over what would be the 'perfect' date for Remus. Being the master of Great Ideas, as he was, he had all kinds of plans for grand gestures and adorable little getaways until Matthew, looking slightly intimidated, had gently reminded him that this was, after all, *the first date*. Sirius had only made a handful of 'so?' protestations before conceding that, okay, renting out Oxford's Bodleian library and putting a giant chocolate fountain in the centre of it might've been a *bit* much.

Eventually he'd decided that Matthew should take him to Madame Puddifoot's. It was a slightly ridiculous little cafe just off one of the winding alleyways in town – there was a Subway on the left and a cinema on the right, but somehow this preposterous establishment had managed to survive the grubby fingers of capitalism and had ploughed on, merrily making what Remus proclaimed to be the best hot chocolates in England. Remus and Sirius had discovered it quite by accident one day last summer, and though Sirius always sided with James in saying that it was simply too girly to be frequented by such Manly Men as themselves, he knew it was where Remus sneaked off to whenever he allowed himself an extra-long lunch break – and hell, he couldn't exactly say that he blamed him. These were damn good hot chocolates.

The fact that Matthew had actually heard of Madame Puddifoot's before, and didn't vomit at the idea of visiting, showed that he was probably an alright match for Remus.

It was 10am in the morning - “brunch dates are *so* much cooler than lunch ones, Matthew, do try to keep up” - and Sirius soon spotted Remus outside the cafe doors, wearing a sweater even though it was boiling hot day at the start of July, and looking characteristically fidgety. He always fidgeted when he was nervous.

“If he's been stood up I'm going to *kill* that wan- oh,” Sirius began to snarl, though his vehemence dissipated as soon as he saw that Matthew turned up looking flustered and – he could see through the window – apologizing profusely for being all of forty seconds late. Remus looked just as flustered as he seemed to refute the apologies.

If Sirius knew him at all, he was probably apologizing for being on time.

They soon came inside, and Sirius rested his chin in his palms as he gazed over at the two of them, ordering drinks (it would of course be hazelnut hot chocolate with squirty cream and two flakes, no marshmallows for Remus) and then taking a seat (again, he knew it would be the high-backed chairs by the bookshelves in the corner). Matthew had been briefed in all of this beforehand, and Remus was looking both surprised and a little bit besotted.

“Do you think he looks happy?” asked Sirius in a whisper that was totally unnecessary in the busy cafe, “James! James, does he look happy?? Come on Prongs, fix up, look sharp.”

“I cannot,” began James, through mouthfuls of his rapidly diminishing bacon sandwich, “Even begin – to adequately convey – how little – I care.”

A satisfied swallow, and it was totally diminished. Sirius took a moment to congratulate him, before continuing.

“How can you not care?!” he squeaked, “This is the future of *our* Remus Lupin at stake! He is a poor, defenceless little creature who needs *our* help and assistance in this, his most trying hour.”

“I think he's doing fine,” James said, looking pointedly over Sirius' shoulder in the direction of Remus and Matthew. Sirius followed his gaze, to find the two of them already holding hands. It actually seemed that Remus was the one taking initiative, as his thumb traced patterns up and down the back of Matthew's hand.

“Fast mover,” murmured Sirius, not sure whether to be impressed or... Well, something else.

He stared at the couple for a bit longer than absolutely necessary, trying to decide why he wasn't a hundred percent proud of Remus in the same way he would've been if it had been Peter or James up there getting lucky. He put it down to the same kind of resentment he felt for Evans whenever James fawned over her – except, he didn't *totally* resent Matthew. So.

Fortunately, James' sigh brought him back to reality before he had a chance to dwell any longer on that dreadful 'thinking' business. Mostly – and usually successfully – it was something he endeavoured to avoid.

“This is madness, mate,” James decided, leaning back in his chair. The colour had returned to his cheeks somewhat, and although his eyes were still a bit bloodshot and his hair still two-day greasy, he was starting to look somewhat human again.

Sirius thought about protesting, but then his shoulders drooped and he sighed. “Yeah,” he relented, “You're probably right. Knob. Come on, let's make a subtle exit worthy of the ninjas we continue to aspire to be -”

It was at that moment that the bells on the door sounded even louder and more obnoxiously than ever, as Peter burst in with his characteristic relish for seriously bad timing.

“Guess what!” he exclaimed, catching sight of Sirius and James and grinning, “McGonagall's let me have my lunch hour early! So I'm here to help you spy on Remus and his boyfriend!”

Sirius and James froze where they were standing, and suddenly Sirius understood what was meant when people in books talked about wanting the Earth to open and swallow them whole. Judging from the look on James' face, he shared the sentiment.

“So where are they?” asked Peter, brightly. Comprehension began to dawn on him and his face fell with comic slowness, as he noticed Remus and Matthew staring at them from across the cafe.

Rather unfairly, Sirius thought, it was he that Remus looked to first.

“Sirius?” Remus asked, with an expression that to most people would have seemed totally neutral. To Sirius, James and Peter, it was the face of a young man deciding exactly how angry he was going to be.

Sirius shot James a look, then gathered up every ounce of the bravado he had and clapped his hands together.

“Remus!” he exclaimed, face splitting into a manic grin, “Remus my man, fancy seeing you here! And, oh! Matthew too – what a shock! Gracious James you shall have to hold me up I'm so shocked.”

“Overkill,” James hissed into Sirius' ear, “Overkill!”

“Well, we'd best be off!” he continued, seizing Peter by the shoulder with an ounce of unnecessary force, “Peter here's had a bit too much to drink and, ahaha, we'd better get ol' McGonagall to sort him out, ahaha! Catch you on the flip side, brother!”

Then, to James and Peter, “*Run.*”

So that was exactly what they did.

Chapter 6

Sirius, James and Peter did what all good men do in a crisis. They went into hiding.

Admittedly they only went back to James' house, so it probably wasn't the greatest hide out the world had ever known, but it was at least well defended should Remus decide to attack. And Sirius probably wouldn't blame him.

“That was a bad, *bad* thing we did, mates,” James concluded, with the face of man who was still nursing a hangover and had just humiliated one of his best friends. It was an accurate expression. He did not look good.

“I still maintain that this is mostly Peter's fault,” Sirius argued. He was adopting his usual technique of sulking, and looked every inch the petulant child with his arms crossed over his chest and his brow firmly furrowed.

“It was not!” whined Peter, and James rolled his eyes in Sirius' direction.

“Don't be a twat, Black,” he sighed, “You shouldn't have dragged us off to spy on Remus anyway. Not cool, bro. Not cool.”

“You didn't protest too loudly when bacon sandwiches were involved!” Sirius pointed out, “Fickle man. And *besides*, it wasn't like he noticed until *Wormy* came along and *ruined it*.”

Peter flicked two fingers in Sirius' direction, then looked slightly ashamed of himself. Sirius was a surprised and also a little proud – it wasn't often Peter reacted so strongly (by his standards) towards anybody. Recovering from his brief moment of pride Sirius scowled at him, and Peter looked as if he would never even consider being so daring again.

James' phone bleeped angrily from somewhere in the corner. Sirius knew from its fury that it would be Remus. Phones were so clever like that.

Hello. Are you at home?

Remus Lupin to James Potter, 1.18pm.

“Blast,” said James, staring at his phone.

“Moony?” asked Peter, and James nodded. “What's it say?”

“Asking if we're home,” he replied, then looked up at Sirius, “Are we home?”

Sirius panicked. “I don't know!” he said, “Are we home?”

“I think – I think we're home?” Peter said, hesitantly.

Sirius waved an impatient hand in his direction. “Well of course we're at home,” he said, “But *are we at home*?”

“Ah,” said Peter.

“Ah,” replied Sirius.

“Ahhh!” shrieked James, as his phone beeped again. It sounded even angrier this time.

I'll take your silence as a yes. I'll be there in a minute.

Remus Lupin to James Potter, 1.20pm.

Sirius stole his phone, read the text and yelped. “The fury! Look at the fury in his voice!” he exclaimed, jumping up and down on the balls of his feet, “I've never *seen* someone so angry. What do we do? God damn it men *what do we do* ?”

“Put the kettle on,” said James, “I'll put the kettle on.”

“Yes,” Sirius agreed, vehemently, “Good thinking. Hit him with a brew as soon as he walks in. Pre-emptive strike. He won't know what to do.”

“Can I have one?” asked Peter, but was promptly silenced by a death glare from James and Sirius.

“Actually,” said Sirius, after a second, “Make me one too?”

James sighed. “Fine,” he relented, “Ten giant buckets of sugar for you Sirius, I assume?”

Before he had a chance to reply in the affirmative, the doorbell rang loudly throughout the flat, and he whimpered.

“Quick!” he said, “Quickly, James, kettle kettle kettle! Peter, with me, come on, look cool. Act natural.”

“Wait – who gets the door?” asked Peter, and was greeted with a screech of “not me!” from James and Sirius simultaneously, before he'd even finished his sentence. He sighed. Oh, his was a heavy burden to bear.

“I have to act natural!” Sirius explained, as if Peter would ever have questioned him anyway.

As James scampered off to the kitchen and Peter grudgingly trudged towards the front door, Sirius looked frantically around the room to discern what would be the most 'natural' position to be found in. When Remus and Peter walked in a second later, they found Sirius sprawled elegantly across the sofa, his hair artfully dishevelled and an upside down copy of *Crime and Punishment* in his hand. He was well aware of this error, but trusted neither Remus nor Peter to have the heart to point it out. And they didn't. Bless them.

“Well,” said Remus, and Sirius looked slowly up from beneath his eyelashes. He was still deciding whether to be extremely apologetic or to just own his behaviour – and the mysterious look that glinted around the edges of Remus' mouth (it could have been fury or it could have been amusement) made the decision all the more difficult.

Fortunately – or perhaps, unfortunately – Peter made the decision for him.

“We're so sorry!” he yelled, a little louder than was necessary. Sirius winced. Peter had never been able to handle tension. “We're so very sorry for ruining your date, Remus! So sorry! So full of sorry we might – we might burst! We might burst with all the sorry! Such sorry!”

James appeared in the doorway with a cup of tea in each hand. He blinked.

“Tea?” he suggested, but shook his head when Sirius held out his hands.

“We only had two teabags left,” he explained, “And I figured they should go to those who need them most.” He handed one to Remus, who just looked bemused, and then the other to Peter, who looked relieved and grateful.

Remus sat down on a nearby chair, nursing his tea. Sirius looked at him nervously.

“So...” he began, in that slow and careful voice that Sirius was sure he'd been trained by teachers to perfect, “I take it you're all – sorry?”

He sent the matching teacher gaze to James, Peter and Sirius in turn, and they all nodded like the obedient five year old children that – when it came to Remus – they pretty much were.

“*Very* sorry,” added James, for emphasis.

Remus was quiet for long moment, then took the first, slow sip of his tea.

“Then,” he said, and the tension in the room was palpable, “I forgive you.”

“Really?” asked Sirius, shocked and delighted, but he did notice how Remus didn't quite meet his eyes when he nodded.

“Good man, Moony,” said James, grinning. Peter looked like he might wet himself with happiness. He really couldn't handle tension, and took a shaky sip of his tea.

“Though you absolutely do not deserve it,” Remus reminded them, delivering just a hint of that stern look once more to remind them that he still had the right to be furious – if he so chose.

“We don't,” Sirius agreed passionately, “We are *worms* – oh, sorry Wormtail. We are... Grubs. Grubby little grubs under your lovely benevolent feet. Grubs.”

“I enjoy your brand of apology, Sirius,” said Remus with a little smile, but he still didn't hold that gaze for more than a second. Sirius felt a little bit sick. “Peter, shouldn't you be at work?”

This little sentence caused Peter to screech and spill his tea all over himself. Ignoring what was clearly *blinding* pain – Sirius didn't blame him; the wrath of McGonagall was far worse – he sped out of the door. One second he was there and the next he wasn't, leaving behind nothing but a tea stain on the carpet. James handled that the way he handled most things – by placing a pillow over it and pretending it wasn't there.

“That was fast,” he said.

“Hang on!” Sirius said, holding up his hand as the car struggled to start outside. “One...” he said.

“Two...” Remus echoed, as the car gave another brave attempt at starting

“Three!” the three men chorused together, as the car burst valiantly into life and disappeared down the road just as quickly as Peter had from the room.

“So,” said Remus, after they'd all finished gazing off fondly in the car's direction, “Are you gonna ask me how it went?”

He had this smile on his face like his own happiness was sort of confusing to him and it was, Sirius had to admit, *adorable*.

“Yeah!” said James enthusiastically, and relieved to have attention away from their own wrongdoings, “How did it go?”

“Really good,” Remus said, nodding and looking down at his tea, “I think your idiocy actually helped in a way, we were able to bond over how very inferior you all are. *Not* that you did me a favour!”

He finished with a warning look at Sirius, who had just opened his mouth to say exactly that. He pouted and sunk back into his chair.

As Remus wittered on to James about his morning, Sirius tucked his legs under himself and decided to Have A Think. For some reason, he was still annoyed that they were talking about Matthew, and even *more* annoyed that Remus had had a good time – even though he was the very person who had ensured that that would be the case. It didn't feel like the same kind of annoyance that he felt when James blathered on about Lily (the kind where he just wanted to seize him by the hair and smash his face into the table) but if it wasn't that, then what could it be? He tapped his chin thoughtfully, and Inner Sirius tapped his tiny chin with his tiny finger in an equally thoughtful manner. Neither of them reached a conclusion.

“I really should get going,” Sirius heard Remus say, and it brought him out of his thoughtful state, which was a blessing. He generally got a headache if he stayed in there too long.

James stood up and took the empty mug from Remus' hand, and headed out into the kitchen. There was a long pause in the room as Sirius frantically searched around the caverns of his brain for something to say. Remus got there first.

“Matthew told me you set the whole thing up,” he said.

Sirius blinked.

“Oh,” he said, “Right. Well, yes! I did. I didn't think he'd tell you though... Silly man, that wasn't the point. It worked through, right? You had a good time?”

Now free of his teacup, Remus seemed at a loss as to do what to do with his hands, and so settled for playing with the hem of his jumper. He nodded.

“Yeah,” he said, and finally looked up to meet Sirius' eyes with a smile that was slow, and soft around the edges. It might even have been a little sad. “I had a good time.”

“Good!” said Sirius brightly, clapping his hands together and smiling properly, “Then all's well that ends well, and we need not castrate Peter today. Do you really have to go?”

Remus nodded. “Yeah, I need to go and sort some things out in the office.”

“But it's your day off!”

“Well, you know me,” Remus shrugged, and Sirius conceded to the point with a nod. That he did.

“Have fun!” he said, cheerfully. He sat back in the sofa and rested his feet on the coffee table, flicking on the TV and finding that – as always – an episode of Gilmore Girls was playing. Pleased that they had sorted everything out, he smiled happily to himself and settled in to watch. It took about eight seconds for him to realize that Remus was still stood in the doorway.

When he looked over, Remus was looking at him with an indiscernable look.

“..What?” asked Sirius, warily, “Do I have crap on my face?”

Remus blinked and then laughed, and it seemed to shake him out of his stupor. “No, you're fine,” he assured him, “See you later, Sirius. Bye, James!” And, with a wave, he was gone.

James replaced him in the doorway, carrying two cups of tea and looking at Sirius like he'd just done something that was stupid and hilarious and typical.

“What?” Sirius demanded, “Why does everybody keep looking at me like that?!”

James shook his head, sitting down next to Sirius on the sofa and passing him a cup of tea.

“You, Sirius Black,” he began, “Are a very stupid man.”

Sirius frowned, but accepted the tea. “I thought we were out of teabags?” he asked.

“I lied,” replied James, taking a sip of his tea and becoming immediately engrossed in Gilmore Girls.

Sirius was left with the sneaking suspicion that, somehow, everybody knew more about something than they were letting on.

July ploughed on with characteristic determination. Peter continued to be bad at his job, Remus continued to see Matthew, and James continued to be rejected by Lily.

“This is *pathetic*,” James whined, collapsing onto the sofa as soon as they got home from work one evening, “*I am pathetic.*”

“I quite agree, mate,” Sirius said, sitting on the arm of the sofa and patting James gingerly on the head.

Currently, the living room had been decorated to resemble a pirate ship. The four sofas were arranged in a boat shape, an old stuffed giraffe by the name of Monsieur Buttlecork formed the figurehead, and a white duvet sheet had been attached to a washing line pole in the middle. It had been decorated by James and Sirius with their “official” coat of arms – a naked lady dressed as a lion. It had come to Sirius in a dream, and he had decided it was perfect. Clearly.

Remus eyed the coat of arms with suspicion, but apparently decided that it was probably best not to mention it. He sat down in what was known as the Captain's Nest area and was soon joined by Peter, with whom he shared a familiar long-suffering expression. By this stage they were both used to walking into Castle Potter and finding the living room in a totally different shape, and really it wasn't that different from their days at boarding school, when James and Sirius would frequently push all the beds together in pursuit of a particularly bouncy football pitch.

“What am I gonna do, men?” James asked. He sat up as if the weight of the world was quite literally on his shoulders, and looked utterly miserable. “Remus, you know her best -”

“I will say again,” Remus said patiently, “One shared science experiment in Year 9 does not mean I *know* her. Time to let it go.”

“You were prefects together,” Peter pointed out.

“So? That crazy bitch Dorcas Meadows was a prefect as well,” Sirius said, and Remus nodded.

“Exactly,” he said, “A perfect example of how joint prefect-ship does not make for lifetime friendships.”

“Didn't she tell your parents you were shagging?” Sirius asked, laughing at the memory.

Remus shuddered. “Yes,” he muttered, “I don't think I've ever seen my Mum look so unhappy. For a terrifying moment she seemed to think I'd gone back in the closet.”

Sirius rolled his eyes, and even James managed a weary little glimmer of a smile. Remus' parents were the most liberal people Sirius had ever met, and poor Remus had never stood a chance at being straight. That said it was pretty amusing how he'd ended up so shy and well-behaved, given that his parents had been dragging him to protest marches since he was old enough to hold a sign and chant loudly. Still, they didn't seem to mind his quiet and bookish nature – the fact that they could proudly talk about having a gay son seemed to make up for it in competitions to 'out-liberal' their friends.

James soon relapsed into his state of abject despair.

“Why are we talking about this?!” he demanded, “I need *help*, men, help me *please*.”

He was, predictably, greeted by silence. Sirius sighed. Ever since puberty had given everyone a swift kick up the backside when they were all thirteen years old, James had given Lily Evans nothing but blind adoration. Five years on, and the closest he'd ever got to actually copping a feel was when they'd had to play Blind Mans Bluff in drama, and he'd “accidentally” fallen on top of her.

(Playing his usual role of jealous girlfriend, Sirius had checked the blindfold afterwards, and found that it was actually a little bit see-through. “Accidentally” his arse.)

“You could..” Peter began, but it soon trailed into silence.

“What if you..” started Sirius, but he trailed off quickly as well.

“What do girls even *like*?” asked Remus, but sadly it was just as much of a mystery to the other three as it was to him.

It was definitely a mystery to Sirius, but he just had some kind of way with the ladies that often made them fall at his feet. It had been bloody spectacular during school, when he was the first to lose his virginity and whatnot, but now it was starting to get strangely annoying. He figured it was just a phrase. Over-sexed, or something. Yeah. That was probably it.

“Did you ruffle your hair?” he suggested.

James nodded miserably. “Yeah,” he sighed, “Nothing.”

“Fuck,” said Peter.

“Well,” Remus began, tentatively, “They say.. Music is the.. Food of love?”

Sirius' eyes lit up.

“YES! Moony, you're a genius! James James Jamesie James, you must write her a song!” he declared, clapping excitedly as the wheels of genius began turning in his brain.

“That is so completely not what I was going to say,” Remus said, but with the air of man who knew well that resistance was futile.

James sat up. “*Yes*,” he said, probably just because it was something he hadn't actually done before. “Yes, it will be brilliant! But – when?”

“Tomorrow,” said Sirius, “We can go in our lunch break! Surprise her! It'll be so romantic!”

“It won't,” said Remus, but was ignored.

“Yes!” agreed James, to Sirius not Remus, “You can provide back up vocals and Peter can be the dancer!”

“Awesome,” Peter said, and shared a capital-L Look with Remus.

“Stop looking at each other, you two,” Sirius said, though he hadn't even been looking at them. “Come on, we need to get down to business. Peter, we need you to give us your Moves Like Jagger, and Remus, we're going to need all the iambic pentameter and half-rhymes you've got. Stop looking so disapproving, I know you're wetting yourself with excitement that I've used the word pentameter. Now stop fucking about and get me a bloody pen!”

They both did as they were told (and Peter's moves really were something very special indeed) and about forty minutes later, there lay before them a Most Magnificent Ballad, comprised largely of lines from other songs.

Lily Evans did not stand a chance.

Chapter 7

The day that followed was particularly hot. The blue sky stretched out above the castle whilst sun beat down upon it without mercy, forcing tourists and employees alike to take refuge under the leafy canopies of the old oak trees. Sirius and James were the sort of boys who were made for summer days, as if they'd been born with sunshine in their veins, and both revelled in the carefree freedom that the British summer so rarely gave.

"This is a good sign, my friend," said James, brimming with visible excitement. They'd just returned from the morning's performance, and were both absolutely drenched with sweat thanks to the heavy armour they had to wear. James sniffed himself tentatively, and then pulled a face. "Ugh. Do you think she'll mind?"

"Yes," said Sirius, and chucked deodorant and a spare t-shirt at him. "Have mine. Personally I think being sweat soaked only adds to my manly allure, but on your pale and weedy frame you simply look absurd."

"Poor me," sighed James, pulling the t-shirt on over his head after a liberal application of deodorant. It didn't make a great deal of difference and what little difference it did make would be obliterated as soon as they stepped back out into the sunshine, but still. Marks for effort.

"Have you got the thingymajig?" asked Sirius, trusting James to know what he meant.

He did. "Yep," he said, pulling a crumpled piece of paper out of his pocket. The look of boyish excitement wavered as he scanned the lyrics one more time. "Do you really think this is a good idea?"

Sirius groaned. "Oh, mate," he began, "I don't sodding know but, honestly? By this stage, *you might as fucking well*. What have you got to lose?"

"The remaining shreds of my dignity?"

"Overrated!"

"You're probably right," said James, sitting down on a nearby haystack. In fact, it was the same haystack he always sat on whilst thinking, and Sirius made a mental note to sit there next time he needed to Have A Think. Perhaps it had powers.

"I'm always right," he reminded him, "Text the boys?"

ASSEMBLE.

Sent from James Potter to Remus Lupin and Peter Pettigrew, 12.53a.m.

"Meeting them there, yeah?" asked Sirius, standing up.

James nodded. "Yep. Right." He took a deep breath and steeled himself for the long walk. "Let's get a wiggle on."

Back in their usual everyday clothes, the two intrepid soldiers bounded over the Castle grounds in the direction of the tower. The unfeasibly warm weather had brought with it a colossal amount of tourists, and Sirius thanked the Gods once again that his job was to entertain rather than serve. They passed the Knight Training School, where a gaggle of eight year old boys were engaged in a fierce battle to the death; they passed the Birds of Prey Exhibition, which always freaked Sirius out a bit because the falcons had a striking resemblance to his mother; they walked around the Mound (the highest part of the Castle), then past the Central Courtyard, and then finally arrived at the Princess Tower. There was a long queue – consisting mostly of small girls dressed up in Disney Princess attire and their long-suffering parents – but Sirius and James edged their way to the front.

"What are you doing here?" asked Dirk Cresswell, a boy who'd been in the year below them at school and had always rather admired James, Sirius, Remus and Peter.

As did most.

"Come to woo my sweet lady," said James, grinning. Sirius nodded enthusiastically beside him.

"Oh, Jesus..." said Dirk, but he was already unclipping the rope to let them pass through.

"Wait!" said Peter, running up behind them and looking flustered as ever.

"Finally!" Sirius said, all but shoving Peter through the entrance. They rounded up the spiral staircase, with James leading the way.

"Where's Remus?" Peter asked.

Sirius shrugged. "Maybe he'll meet us up there?"

"He'd better," said James, darkly.

He was starting to look a little bit green in the face, so Sirius grabbed him by the shoulder. "I got your back, buddy," he assured him, not entirely sure of what it meant to have somebody's back in a serenading situation, but feeling confident of it all the same.

They waited outside the door at the top of the spiral staircase until it was swung open by a greasy haired, hook nosed individual who looked at them blankly for a second until Sirius cried out "Snivellus!", and then he shut the door in their faces.

"I'd forgotten he'd be here," said James. So had Sirius, but the reminder only made him all the more gleeful.

They had been at school with Snape for seven years, and so now when they were given an opportunity to torture him once more it felt like a return to the Good Old Days. It wasn't cruel, it was nostalgic! Everybody loves nostalgia!

“I think you've also forgotten that we know how to use doors,” he said, reaching out and turning the handle and stepping in.

“Snivellus, my man!” he cried merrily, seizing Snape by the shoulders. “Good to see you again, God, I think I've got grease all over my fingers. Here, Peter, help me out.”

He wiped his hands on Peter's shirt, who whimpered and cried out an exaggerated “Ewww! Now it's all over my shirt! I can't get it off!”

“Oh, no,” said Sirius, looking concernedly at the invisible grease stain on his clothes, “Snivellus, what do you use? Some kind of industrial strength fairy liquid? Or do you just get used to swimming in your own filth every day?”

“*Hilarious*, Black,” hissed Snape, “Really *intelligent*. Do *you* enjoy being surrounded by filth every day? How is dearest Lupin, anyway?”

To anybody else it would've sounded vague, but to the three of them it was a clear reference to Remus' sexual preference. Sirius - as always - had to fight hard against the urge to punch Snape in the face. Or somewhere a little further south.

“He's *incredible*, thank you,” Sirius replied, smiling through greeted teeth, “So sweet to know that you care. James, back me up.”

He blinked, looking around.

“James?”

“CAAAAN YOU FEEEL THE LOOOOOOOOVE TONIIIIIGHHTTT?? HOW DO I LOOOOOOOOOOOOOOVE THEEEEEEEEEEEEE???”

“Oh, God,” echoed Sirius and Snape, in perfect unison.

All of sudden, it seemed like the worst idea in the world.

Lily had stopped mid-sentence and was staring at James, whose hands were shaking as he clenched the piece of paper, but who was singing with incredible confidence for someone who absolutely *could not* sing. This was a major flaw in the plan that they had seriously overlooked. The tourists were staring – some seemed amused, some seemed excited, but most just seemed like they couldn't work out whether or not this was part of the act. Lily, who did look really quite nice in her bejewelled gown and with her hair piled neatly on top of her head, seemed as if she were struggling to contain a rocket ship of rage within her. It was like she had a whole separate person inside of her, battling to get out, and she was shaking almost as much as James' hands.

But god damn it, they had made this decision together and they were going to carry it out together.

“Peter,” whispered Sirius, as James belted out that Lily's eyes were the sweetest eyes he'd ever seen, “You know what to do.”

Peter nodded like a man going to war, and he broke out the moves.

“OOOOOOOHHHHH!!!” sang Sirius, loudly, and he jumped closer to James. He stretched out his arms and wiggled his fingers - jazz hands, was it? James looked at him gratefully. “AHHHHH!!!”

“AND THE POWER OF LOOOOOOVEEEEE GOT ME LOOKING SO CRAZY RIGHT NOW!! YOUR TOUCH GOT ME HOPING YOU'LL SAVE ME RIGHT NOW! OHHHH, AND YOU CAN TELL EVERRRYYYYBODYYYYY!!!”

Really, Sirius mused, as he crowed out his 'ooh's and 'ahh's, and as Peter threw shapes in the background, this was going quite well. James hadn't wet himself with fear, his own voice hadn't made anyone's ears bleed, and Peter wasn't actually half bad at this dancing business. Maybe they could make some money out of this, he thought. Maybe they were on to something.

“JAMES POTTER,” screeched Lily, as he was mid way through telling her that it was a love story and baby she should just say yes.

Maybe not.

James was on his knees, for some reason, and he looked up at her weakly.

“Yes, darling?” he asked, voice quavering.

Lily was visibly shaking, but through gargantuan effort she forced a smile on to her face. Sadly she couldn't rid her eyes of that blood thirsty, murderous look, so it wasn't totally convincing.

“I am so moved!” she declared, voice slightly higher than usual, “By this display of – ah, chivalry, good sir! What a romantic proposition!” She glanced awkwardly at the unsure audience. “And, ah – forsooth!”

James looked confused, and slightly scared, but also like he might be a little pleased that she hadn't kicked him in the bollocks. Sirius knew that this was Lily's metaphorical bollocks-kicking, and the actual bollocks-kicking would be sure to follow later, but James – bless him – was in love, and was therefore a fucking idiot. Sirius seized him by the shoulders and hoisted him to his feet.

“Might we meet later to discuss further your – um, lyrical display of love??” Lily asked, glaring daggers at James and Sirius equally.

Sirius tried his best to look innocent, whilst James still looked like he couldn't decide whether to be frightened or pleased.

“By moonlight, sweet lady!” exclaimed Sirius. James immediately frowned. “Our brave knight is so overcome by love he has momentarily lost his voice!”

“I have?” asked James, and Sirius kicked him.

“He has! Oh, such is the power you wield upon his tiny, fragile heart!” he continued.

It was the first time in his whole life that Lily had ever looked grateful towards him (which was a bit unsettling), and it almost looked like this attempt to make it seem as if the whole thing was staged was beginning to work. A few older women were smiling soppily at James and Lily, and even Peter looked like he was beginning to wonder whether or not this some elaborate joke on him. James had such blind faith in Sirius that Sirius knew he'd just go along with this – and he did, nodding and miming words to emphasize his inability to speak.

“Later, then, fair lady!” Sirius continued, noticing with enjoyment how Snape seemed very disappointed that no blood had been shed this day.

Lily had stopped shaking. Mostly.

“Away, men! Awaaayyy!”

He seized James with one hand and Peter with the other, and fled.

“If you ever marry that girl, your whole marriage is gonna be like an episode of Jeremy Kyle,” said Sirius, “She'll tear your balls off. Where the bloody *fuck* was Remus?”

“I thought that went really... Well?” James said – starting enthusiastically but growing progressively less confident throughout the course of the brief sentence. It ended up as more of a question than a statement.

“I feel like I missed something,” admitted Peter.

“You probably did,” Sirius agreed, patting him on the back.

He turned his attention back to James. “I'm sorry, mate. I think you'll feel her wrath later.”

Slowly, he started to grin. “That was bloody great, though. I loved your improvising, mate. Really innovative.”

“Thanks,” James sighed.

“And Pete! Petey boy you've got moves. Don't know why you didn't crack those out when we went clubbing for your birthday.”

“Too busy vomiting,” he said, “Not like you'd have noticed – how many people did you get off with that night?”

“Can't remember,” Sirius said, lighting up a cigarette and taking a drag. They were sat behind one of the Castle walls, near the moat. Not strictly a smoking area, but fuck it, really. “That whole night is a blur. A blissful blur.”

“I just want to get off with Lily,” James moaned, stealing Sirius' cigarette and not giving it back.

“Oi!” he said.

“My need is greater than yours.”

Sirius was forced to concede to that point.

“I knew I'd find you here,” said a familiar voice behind them.

Sirius turned to find Remus looking down at them, wearing that predictable 'you are all so very silly and I am so very not' expression.

“*You!*” Sirius growled, “Where *were* you? It was a bloody disaster!”

James cradled his head in his hands and made a sound like a dying cat.

“I knew it would be,” said Remus, sitting down next to James and taking the cigarette. “It's bad for you,” he said, taking a drag before chucking it into the river, “Won't help.”

“Fuck off,” said James, “It was your bloody idea.”

“It was not!”

“More to the point,” Sirius interrupted, eyes narrowed, “*Where were you?*”

“I was helping Matthew with his project,” he replied, and at least had the decency to look a little bit embarrassed about that.

The other three made loud noises of disapproval.

“What about Project '*Get Prongs Laid*'??” demanded James, and Remus held up his hands in surrender.

“I'm sorry!” he said, “I'm sorry – I know, I should've have been there. I am a measly little man. I'm sorry, I just didn't check my phone and we were – ah, busy?”

“Busy how..?” asked James slowly, narrowing his eyes in a manner almost identical to Sirius'. Even Sirius had noticed how creepy it often was that they had such similar mannerisms.

“Just, you know,” mumbled Remus, looking away from the three of them and fiddling with the grass, “Busy.”

He cleared his throat, awkwardly.

“Betrayal!” declared Peter.

“Traitor!” joined in Sirius, checking his pockets for something to throw at Remus but coming up with nothing, so he just growled at him instead.

“I do *not* want to hear about you getting lucky when you were meant to be helping me get lucky,” said James, “As it happens I got distinctly unlucky.” He sighed. “Again.”

"I'm sorry," said Remus, patting James on the back, "Truly I am. Call it revenge for the other day..."

He eyed Sirius carefully as he said this, who immediately resumed his best innocent face.

"So," continued Remus, "How bad was it?"

"Really bad," Peter answered simply, "Like – fucking atrocious."

"Bloody hell Wormtail, d'you want him to kill himself now or would you rather do the honours?" asked Sirius.

He, of course, was the paradigm of sensitivity, and would never have been so tactless. Peter fell silent.

James still had his head in his hands, which was probably a good thing because Sirius suspected that his eyes might have been a little bit red if he were able to see them, which would leave him with no choice but to mercilessly mock him – for which he would then feel very cruel afterwards and his conscience would force him to do the washing up. Oh, how he hated the washing up.

Perhaps prompted by this fairly liquid threat, his brain granted him An Idea. "I'll tell you what we need!" he declared, "A boy's night. A proper boy's night in – we'll watch, I don't know -"

"Dirty Dancing?" James suggested, voice muffled by his knees.

"No. Something manly like... Like Die Hard."

"Oh I hate that film," said Peter, "If we're watching a Christmas film can it be The Grinch?"

"Fine," said Sirius impatiently, "Not Die Hard – but not The Grinch either – but something! Not Christmassy. Something manly and exciting. Star Wars!"

"No way," Remus said, "He'll just end up sobbing over Hans Solo and Princess Leia."

"I will not sob," James mumbled weakly, but it went unheard.

"Well you don't get a say, traitorous Moony," Sirius said, "But, good point. It's not up to you though, we'll just end up watching History Boys again."

"It's so good though!" protested Remus.

"Yes," Sirius conceded, "Yes it is very good. But that is not the point. Alright – we'll discuss the film later. The point is, Boys Night In. Most importantly, we need booze. Is there still some down in the Shack?"

The Shack was - predictably - a shack, located in the grounds of the Castle where nobody ever went. It had been their hiding place for booze and weed and all manner of delightful substances for many a long year.

“I don't know,” said Peter, “We might've used it all up over Christmas making Mulled Beer.”

All four of them shuddered. It was so foul a memory it helped to bring James out of his misery – but only for a second, then he was back wallowing in its depths once more.

“No, there's still some down there,” Remus said.

“How do you know?” asked Sirius.

“I was – I was down there earlier, if you must know,” said Remus, growing slightly pink.

“Whyyy?” Sirius asked, suspicious.

“Just.. with Matthew,” he replied quickly, “For his – project.”

“Oh God,” groaned Sirius, curling his lip, “Is project a euphemism?”

Remus' ears went red. “Yes?” he admitted, wincing in preparation for the inevitable bad reaction.

Sirius yelped and put his hands over his ears – and James joined him, emerging from his little body cocoon to groan and shove at Remus' shoulder. Peter just laughed and laughed, clutching at his stomach.

“We're gonna have to call it the Shrieking Shack from now on,” he said, giggling hysterically.

“We bloody well are not,” Sirius said, indignantly, “That is a silly name. Do be quiet. Oh, settle down.”

Peter put his hands firmly over his mouth but continued to giggle underneath them, his eyes bright like baubles and his belly shaking like a bowlful of jelly. God damn it, all that talk of The Grinch had Christmas on the brain, now. Still, it was a far better thing to have on his brain than Remus and Matthew's antics in the Shack... Sirius shook his whole body as if he were a dog shaking off water.

“The point is,” he continued loudly, “There is booze in the Totally Platonic And In No Way Sexual Shack. Right, Moony?”

“Right,” agreed Remus, clearly grateful to no longer be talking about it.

“Splendid,” Sirius said, “Tonight men, we dine in hell!”

“Ooh, are we making dinner?” asked Peter, releasing himself from self-imposed silence, “I made the most amazing spaghetti bolognese last night.”

“No!” declared Sirius, “Manly food! Steak! Streak and lots of steak!”

“Oh good,” said Remus, his eyes lighting up. He'd always had an inexplicable fondness for really, really rare steak.

“Preferably not dripping with blood?” James said, still playing his role of broken man superbly, but having perked up a little at the mention of steak.

“I will cook,” Sirius decided, “And it will be magnificent, and manly, and will not contain any kind of pansy herbs or spices or whatever at all. We are *men*. And all you need is men!”

“Careful, Sirius, or I'll think you're coming over to my side and will have to send out a warning at the next meeting,” said Remus, “Speaking of – can Matthew come?”

“Nooooo!” cried Sirius, “No, this is an us only event!”

“I think it'd be good if Matthew came,” said James, shrugging, “Might show me that there's still hope. That romance can still exist in this bleak and desolate world.”

“He's a man, right?” said Peter, and Remus nodded patiently.

“Yes,” he said, “Much to Snape's eternal disappointment. It's so sweet of him to care.”

“Fine!” said Sirius, “Fine, Matthew can come. Fine. Seven o' clock and we will fix our little Prongsie with steak and beer and something very very manly that is not Die Hard or Star Wars.”

“Notting Hill?” suggested Remus, but he was shouted down unanimously.

Chapter 8

She's on the warpath!!!!

Peter Pettigrew to James Potter, 6.28p.m.

Every day they finished work at 6.30 and were out of there within about ten minutes, but this day - after receiving an ominous text from Peter - James and Sirius fled the Castle with unprecedented haste. They took an alternative route, which had them tiptoeing precariously across a fallen log over the river before sneaking quietly past the Bird of Prey nest. *Quietly* was the optimum word – it was havoc if you woke them past bedtime, and Sirius was in no mood to deal with unruly birds. Hence why they were hiding from Lily.

But, spite of their best efforts, her eagle eyes caught sight of them as they legged it through the car park.

“*POTTER!*” she screeched, hands on hips and freckled cheeks ablaze with fury.

Sirius could sense that James wanted to stop – he was already slowing down – so he ran at his friend full speed, seized him by the legs, and hoisted him up over his shoulder.

“It's for your own good!” he yelled, as James wailed in protest and rained a flurry of furious fists down upon Sirius' back.

Remus and Peter were already in the running car, both of them motioning frantically for James and Sirius to hurry up, but only Remus mouthing apologies to Lily through the window. Oh, that insufferably polite man. It was like being involved in a bank robbery with one of the getaway team apologizing to the manager.

“*Drive, drive, drive!*” Sirius yelled, dumping James in the car, shoving him ruthlessly along the back seat and then climbing in. He shut the door as the car screeched away, with Lily still raging and swearing in middle of the car park.

“That was exciting!” said Peter, though he sounded mostly terrified, “That was far too exciting! Oh!”

“Maybe she wanted to thank me?” James mumbled, curling up in a ball on his seat.

“She didn't, mate,” said Sirius, “She definitely didn't.”

Remus nodded pityingly, and reached around from the front seat to pat James on the shoulder.

“Straight back to ours, Wormtail,” said Sirius.

“Actually, can you drop me off first, please?” asked Remus.

Sirius frowned. “Why?” he asked.

“Well, Matthew's gonna meet me there, and I wanna shower and stuff first, so...” Remus began, and trailed off into a slightly embarrassed sounding mumble.

Sirius’ frown became a scowl, and he kicked the back of Remus’ seat. “Fiiiine,” he sighed, “But if you're late I'll eat your steak! Mmm, lovely, bloody steak. Om nom nom nom.”

“I won't be late,” Remus promised, quickly.

It was only a couple more minutes until they'd dropped Remus off at his house and then carried on up towards the more expensive end of the street, where Castle Potter was to be found. Within moments of entering, Peter and James were sat cross-legged in front of their less than impressive DVD collection.

(“Why is Dirty Dancing on the top of the pile?” Peter had asked, and James had said “Because Sirius *Woman* Black has watched it eleven times since summer started” before Sirius had a chance to deny everything.)

Eventually they decided upon watching absolutely nothing at all because, typically, everything had a romance. Everything. James drooped onto Peter's shoulder.

“Everything?” asked Sirius, eyebrows raised, “Wow, we *are* pathetic. Oh well. Gives us more opportunity to grill Matthew, I guess.”

“There will be absolutely no grilling involved,” James warned him, “Or I'll grill you.”

Sirius stuck his tongue out at James. “I ain't scared of you, Potter. I’ll take a knife to Monsieur Buttlecork - and don’t think I won’t.”

James gasped. “You wouldn’t dare.”

It was true. He wouldn't.

The doorbell rang throughout the house, and Peter nearly fell out of his chair.

“That'll be them!” he said, “Gosh, what if Matthew doesn't like us? I mean, after what we did...”

“I don't want him to like us,” said Sirius, getting the steaks out of the fridge with all thoughts of giraffe slaughter aside. “I want him to *fear* us. I want him quaking in his wanky hipster TOMs. If he doesn't cry before the night is out, I shall count myself an eternal failure.”

“You already are an eternal failure,” James pointed out, and was rewarded with yet another stuck out tongue – this time accompanied by his reliable companion, Middle Finger.

“Why do you want him to fear us?” Peter asked.

Ugh. Bloody Peter. So insensitive. So tactless. Could he not *tell* that Sirius didn't know the answers to that question? Did he not *know* that whenever Sirius tried to answer that question, alarm bells started ringing in his brain and Inner Sirius ran for the hills? Was he so *very bloody clueless*?

James had his arms folded over his chest, and was looking at Sirius expectantly.

“Because,” Sirius began, spluttering indignantly, “Because I just do! Because I am a better friend than either of you brainless chimps and I don't want to see Remus get hurt.”

“Riiiiight,” James drawled, eyebrows raised and smirking.

“The fuck is that supposed to mean?” demanded Sirius, and James raised his hands in mock surrender.

The doorbell rang again, several times, and it was a welcome distraction from the permeable tension in the room.

“I'll get it,” said James, softly for some unknown reason, and he smiled at Sirius and ruffled his hair as he left the kitchen.

Sirius pulled a face and inspected his reflection in the bottom of a frying pan. Though he appreciated a good hair-ruffling as much as the next man, there was a bloody time and place.

“Pete, d'you think I'm hot?” he asked, carefully mussing his hair so that it felt artfully over one eye.

“Yeah,” Peter admitted, with a long suffering sigh.

Surprised, Sirius turned around to face him, and raised an eyebrow. Peter turned slightly pink, perhaps realizing that that wasn't necessarily the most acceptably heterosexual response, but then just decided to own it. “Well,” he said, standing firm by his decision, “You are! Anyway, fuck off, you know you are.”

Sirius smiled contentedly, turning back to the frying pan mirror. “Yeah,” he agreed, giving the pan his best smouldering look.

“I hope you're going to buy that pan a drink first,” said Remus, smiling from where he stood in the doorway.

Sirius clutched the pan to his chest. “Of course I am!” he said, “I know how to treat a girl right. Flowers and chocolates and then a light spanking.” He noted Matthew's absence, and something in his stomach gave an inexplicably joyful leap. He put it down to Steak Anticipation. “Where's lover boy?”

“Matthew,” Remus corrected, “Is still stood with James in the hallway. He's wearing a Newcastle shirt which I probably should've warned him was a dire mistake.”

Newcastle United were James' football team/one true love/reason for living. He supported them with every inch of his tiny little brain and great big heart; always had, and probably always would. Now that Sirius listened, he could hear James' excitable babbling down the corridor, growing ever closer as they approached.

“And I mean, I *know* the new stadium name is ridiculous, but I just don't understand why everyone's so up in arms about it – I mean, we've got to stand behind our boys, you know?”

Doesn't matter where they play, we've gotta be behind them *no matter what* or else how we will ever get to the top of the league? You *know*?"

James was wearing a look of pure euphoria as he and Matthew rounded into the kitchen. Sirius loved to play football but wasn't really interested in following it in the way that James was, so he'd long since learned to just drown out James' fangirling. Disturbingly though, it wasn't James who was ranting on about the stadium name change but Matthew, and Sirius and Remus looked equally bewildered. James looked like he might weep with joy.

"I *know*!" he exclaimed, and then grabbed hold of Matthew and pulled him into a bone-crushing hug. He looked over at Sirius with puppy dog eyes. "Oh," he breathed, "Oh, can we keep him? *Please* can we keep him?"

Matthew laughed as Remus firmly relinquished James' hold on him, and took Matthew's hand. "No," he said, firmly.

Funnily enough, Sirius had just been about to say the exact same thing.

It only took a couple of hours for Sirius to decide that this really was A Load Of Bollocks.

James still looked absolutely besotted with Matthew – it turned out that he not *only* did he love Newcastle United, but was in fact in possession of a season ticket, and had offered to take James along to the next game. *Show off*. James had looked so utterly, completely, boyishly delighted by this prospect that Sirius had almost wanted to remind him of his humiliation earlier that day, and the more he suppressed his cruelty, the more it bubbled up inside him.

It didn't help that Peter was totally enamoured by him too. Matthew's Dad was apparently a mechanic (James had given Sirius a stern look when he'd snorted derisively at that, but it wasn't *his* fault that he had a Lord for a father), and he'd offered to take a look at Peter's car for him. They'd both disappeared outside for about ten minutes and had then returned with Peter bounding about like a puppy on crack.

"It doesn't take three goes to start!" he'd all but shouted, "It only takes two! *Two*! Can you *conceive* of such a thing?! Yaaayyy!"

Matthew had been sickeningly lovely about the whole thing and said that it was just very basic, and that he hadn't done anything at all really, and honestly Peter was very, *very* welcome.

Tosser.

But in truth, Sirius only barely noticed how adoring James and Peter were, as he was too busy looking at Remus. He looked totally relaxed in a way that Sirius only usually saw when it was just the two of them together, and he laughed that little bit louder, and his smile stretched that little bit wider. Remus had never been one for PDA and he probably never would be, but his and Matthew's hands stayed dangerously close to each other all night.

Sirius became somewhat fixated with the way that Matthew's little finger was edging nearer and nearer to Remus' little finger all night, and as he drank beer after beer after beer, he quite quickly ended up more than a little bit drunk. It was a good feeling. Sort of. He was just about to suggest a drinking game, when -

“Hey, shall we play a drinking game?” suggested Matthew, and was met with a unanimous yes from Peter and James, a groan from Remus, and narrowed eyes from Sirius.

“Sure,” he said, challengingly, “How about Never Have I Ever?”

“Sounds good to me,” James said, raising his beer and his eyebrows in Sirius' direction. “I'll start. Uh, never have I ever... Had a one night stand then snuck out the morning after without saying goodbye.”

Sirius drank immediately. “Well, obviously,” said James, grinning at him.

“So you drink if you have, yeah?” asked Matthew, and when James nodded, he grinned sheepishly and drank.

“I guess I don't want to know?” Remus asked, as James and Peter laughed.

Matthew nodded and leaned over to kiss him on the forehead. “You don't want to know.”

Remus pulled a face and wiped at the place on his forehead where he'd been kissed, but he was smiling, and he took a hold of Matthew's hand.

That did it.

“My turn,” Sirius said loudly, though it definitely wasn't. James and Remus both had the good sense to look a little apprehensive, whilst Peter was still gazing longingly at Matthew.

“Never have I ever...” he began, “Gatecrashed a seven year friendship.”

He looked pointedly at Matthew, who immediately looked nervous. Beside him, Remus started to grow paler. “No?” said Sirius to Matthew, mockingly. “Okay, what about this one. Let's see - ah, yes, never have I ever been so incredibly boring and unoriginal I've had to go to somebody's best friend for advice about a date?”

Matthew still didn't drink.

“Sirius...” said James, warningly, but Sirius was still just looking at Matthew. The rest of the room was swmming.

“Oh, come on, don't be modest!” he continued, “Never have I ever been a total *cunt*?”

Peter hissed in breath and James looked absolutely murderous.

“I think you've maybe had enough,” said Matthew, gently.

“I think you've had more than enough,” said Remus, standing up. He was pale with anger and his eyes were blazing with hurt, and Matthew stood up with him.

Sirius scoffed. “Whatever,” he muttered, leaning back on his chair and downing the remnants of what was clearly five beers too many.

“I trust you can handle this, Prongs?” said Remus, his hands shaking with the effort to control his fury. Matthew didn't look angry at Sirius – hell, he didn't even look at Sirius at all, which was a bit of a pity as he was just *dying* for an excuse to punch him. The bastard was too busy looking concernedly at Remus, and apologizing to James and Peter, both of whom were on their feet and talking quietly to Matthew, saying things like “we're so sorry” and “don't mind him, he's just really drunk” and “god, honestly, *so* sorry”.

“I'm not that drunk,” Sirius snapped, reaching for another beer from the crate. His hand was promptly smacked away, and he started to say “oh fuck off, James”, but when he looked up he found it was Peter. He very rarely saw Peter look annoyed at him, but he did in that moment, and it made something that felt sickeningly like guilt start to creep in at the edges of his fuzzy, alcohol-soaked brain.

Maybe he was that drunk.

Leaving Peter in the room with Sirius, James walked Remus and Matthew out. Sirius' eyes finally fixed on Remus rather than Matthew and they followed him out of the room, but Remus didn't even look in his direction, let alone say goodbye. He felt a lurch of vomit sting the back of his throat and he keeled over a little bit, clutching at his stomach and groaning. Oh, *ow*.

“Well, that was a pretty twattish behaviour on your part, my friend,” said Peter, softly.

It took a Sirius a moment, but eventually he looked up, and blinked over at him. “Yeah?” he asked, sounding quiet and slightly broken.

Peter nodded grimly. “Yeah.”

“Fucking right it was,” said James, reappearing in the doorway, “You *idiot*, Black, you *bloody fucking idiot*. How could you do that to Moony? How *could* you? Tell me, do you go *out of your way* to make people feel like shit?”

James being angry at him always felt like a dagger in his belly, because it so rarely happened. James wasn't calm and composed in the way that Remus reliably was, but he was definitely a lot more of a Decent Chap than people gave him credit for – especially in recent years. They'd both been a bit mental during most of their academic career, but James had grown out of that probably a little bit more than Sirius had. Sure, together they both still behaved like reckless school children most of the time – anybody who met them knew that – but James was these days a lot quicker to say no to the really mental things than he had been, and knowledge of what was The Right Thing To Do came to him a lot easier than it came to Sirius. James Potter was most definitely the better man, and Sirius knew that well. James Potter was a damn good man.

All of sudden, he felt about two inches tall.

“No?” he offered, feebly.

James sunk down in the nearby chair, and looked at Sirius incredulously; desperately; hopelessly.

“*Really?*” he asked, and it didn’t feel like a rhetorical question. “Because honestly, Sirius, sometimes I reckon you do this shit on purpose.”

Sometimes, in his darkest hours, Sirius reckoned he did this shit on purpose too, and it was perhaps that thought that made him feel worse than anything. He looked down at his hands. “Shit,” he said, softly, and James and Peter nodded.

Of course, one of the things that made James such a very good man was that he was also a very forgiving man. It only took a matter of moments before he had moved over to Sirius' chair and was sat on the arm of it, patting Sirius' back.

“Yes,” he agreed, “Shit.”

Chapter 9

Sirius spent the next three days avoiding Remus completely, but did not manage to spend the next three days avoiding torture. Though he felt fairly confident that they *had* forgiven him, Peter and James were still very careful to ensure that Sirius didn't dare to feel like a decent person at any point, constantly making sly comments about betrayal and cruelty that had Sirius attempting to bury himself in the loving arms of the ever benevolent sofa. The living room had now been transformed from a ship into a castle, and James had appointed himself High King (naturally), with Peter serving as his Devilishly Good Looking General and Sirius as his Lowly And Unpleasantly Scented Slave. He was forced to sleep in the kitchen, curled up beneath the broken washing machine, in what had been dubbed the "servants quarters".

This was a slightly confusing punishment as it meant he got to eat himself into oblivion all night (which was one of his all time favourite pursuits) but still, the floor was uncomfortable and hard and the living room castle really was magnificent, so he got the message.

Monday morning rolled around with its usual arrogance and Sirius had a sinking feeling that the time had come to face the music, and dance. This was his very own Strictly Come Dancing, and he was not going to get a 10.

He'd been watching a lot of bad TV to ease himself through the hardship. Dirty Dancing had also been watched more than a handful of times. Whatever. Nobody had to know.

"You're not going to try and serenade him with Hungry Eyes, are you?" asked James. Sirius punched him in the shoulder.

"Wanker," he said, "No. I'm not going to try and serenade him at all."

"What are you gonna do?" asked Peter, from the driver's seat. Remus had been declining Peter's offers of morning lifts to work for the past couple of days, and his absence was clearly felt. His empty seat made them all feel horribly bereft, like ships floating aimlessly at sea.

"Pout?" suggested Sirius, "Smoulder? Toss my hair in a manner that is simultaneously effortless and alluring?"

"I wish I knew how to do that," complained James, messing with his own hair for the eighty fourth time that morning.

"Sucks to be you, bro."

"Somehow I don't think Remus will fall for it," Peter said, as he pulled into their usual parking space.

"You underestimate me, good sir," said Sirius, stepping out of the car and immediately regretting it. Britain was in the depths of one of it's rare, hugely unpleasant heat waves, and it was even starting to take its toll on Sirius and James. "Mother of *fuck* it is hot."

Peter yelled and dived back in his car for his faithful Factor 50.

“Well, at least Lily won't try and attack me again today,” said James. It was a well known fact that Lily Evans was rarely seen out in the sunshine – her fire engine hair and abundance of freckles meant that even Peter's double strength sunblocks were basically ineffectual.

She had cornered him the day after what was now being referred to as **The Incident**. Her fury had rained down upon them with all the heat and determination of recently exploded lava, and Sirius and Peter had both taken shelter in Darth Vader's stall as she screamed bloody murder at James for his ridiculousness, his rudeness, and the way he had utterly humiliated her at work. James had babbled apologies and excuses in a stream of patheticness that went ignored, and Sirius' heart had bled for him, the poor little idiot. He knew that James thought Lily was incredibly sexy when she was furious, and was therefore rendered utterly useless. After she'd gone, he'd slumped down on his beloved haystack and remained incapacitated for the rest of the day.

“And I guess it means Remus won't go looking for me either,” Sirius said. Remus didn't burn easily – in fact he went a really delightful colour when he'd been out in the sun – but he just hated the summer with every fibre of his being, and could be depended upon to lock himself inside unless forced out with books, chocolate and the promise of returning indoors soon. When Sirius had questioned him years ago about his hatred of the warmer months (“*They are glorious months, Moony! Glorious months made for water pistols and cider in the sunshine and girls wearing hardly anything at all! Glorious!*”), Remus had claimed that his loathing was rooted largely in chocolate's inability to survive in the heat. It seemed a plausible excuse – nobody loved chocolate like Remus.

“I don't think he was gonna come looking for you anyway,” said James, as they headed into the Castle, “You know what he's like – bloody mountain of patience.”

“Patience and libraries and all sorts of chocolate,” Peter said fondly, “Please fix this, Sirius, it sucks not having him about.”

Sirius nodded miserably. “I know,” he said, and he did. It really, really sucked, and it felt like there had been a hole that was roughly the size of one quietly mischievous librarian in his stomach ever since the other night. The Other Incident. “I've got four bars of Green and Blacks, d'you reckon it's enough?”

“Depends,” said James, “Have you got the cherry one?”

“Obviously, I'm not a total moron.”

“All the evidence suggests...”

“PETER PETTIGREW!!!”

McGonagall's voice screeched loudly across the main courtyard. “Oh god,” breathed Peter.

“WHAT ON EARTH HAPPENED TO YOU LAST NIGHT? DID YOU *COMPLETELY* LOSE WHAT REMNANTS OF SENSE YOU POSSESSED OR DO YOU GENUINELY

BELIEVE THAT THESE FREEZERS ARE CLEAN ?? I HAVE NO DOUBT THAT IN BLACK AND POTTER'S HOUSEHOLD THIS MIGHT PASS FOR HYGENIC -"

"Aaaand that's our cue," said James.

"Best of luck, buddy!" added Sirius, and they both legged it across the courtyard leaving Peter at the mercy of McGonagall. If such a thing even existed. They rounded the corner with her screams of his inability still ringing in their ears.

"Poor bloke," James said, shaking his head.

"He probably deserves it," Sirius pointed out, and James couldn't argue with that.

Before long it was lunch time, and whilst this break was usually greeted by Sirius with adoration, longing and glee, today it was mostly just terror. He couldn't go and see Remus at the end of the day because he'd scamper off before Sirius had a chance, and he couldn't go in the break later on because it wasn't long enough, so he was just going to have to go now.

Now, Sirius Black was not a man an easily intimidated man. He had removed his trousers in the school talent show; he had been self-appointed Campaign Manager for James' Head Boy position which had meant that he'd had to speak in front of thousands; he'd kissed Arthur Weasley on a dare, and he'd even captured a real live tarantula with his bare hands a school trip to Brazil. Sneaking into the all girls tent had seemed like such a great idea at the time, until it had taken that ugly turn. Still, he had done all of those things with characteristic bravado and unfaltering confidence (except for the Arthur Weasley thing – he'd faltered slightly there), never displaying even the tiniest little morsel of anxiety. This, however - the prospect of going and apologizing to his best friend... It was an anxiety he hadn't felt since The Original Incident way back when, and it made him want to vomit to feel it again now. God, he really had been an arse. A herd of rampant buffalo had made his stomach their home, and Sirius was not best pleased.

James patted him firmly on the back and sent him on his way before Sirius had a chance to come up with any excuses. They knew each other well.

Like a man off to walk the green mile, Sirius trudged off in the direction of Remus' office. The warm weather and bright blue sky was a clear betrayal of his misery. His deep, deep misery.

It seemed to only take seconds, and before he knew it he was stood in Remus' doorway, knocking timidly on the door – he'd never done anything 'timidly' in his life – and finding it empty.

"Remus?" he called, looking around, "Reeeeemuuuuusss?"

"What?" came the miserable response from the corner.

Sirius turned around to find Remus with his nose a mere two inches from the fan. Strands of his hair were stuck to his forehead with sweat and he was rolling a can of diet coke along his forearms, presumably in an attempt to cool down. He also looked like he hadn't slept very well the past three days, Sirius noted, and couldn't decide whether that made him happy or sad.

"Oh," said Remus, "It's you."

Sirius nodded glumly. His palms were sweaty.

"Unfortunately," he agreed.

He stepped into the office and felt as if he were stepping out into the sun. "*Jesus*," he said, momentarily forgetting why he was here, "Is this where all the heat is coming from?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," Remus muttered, "I feel like I'm living in a furnace. The air conditioning's broken."

"And apparently the heating's on full blast as well?"

Remus shrugged. "They deny everything, but I'm on to them."

Perhaps it was just because Remus was delirious with heat, but the fact that he hadn't thrown anything at Sirius or attempted to chop off one of his limbs yet was clearly a good sign. It felt so good to be talking to him again. So good.

"Why are you in here, then?" asked Sirius, perching on the edge of Remus' desk, "Why not the library or – heaven forfend – outside?"

"Matthew's in the library," said Remus, and Sirius knew that it was definitely happiness he felt about the fact that Remus didn't look totally besotted at the mention of his name, "And he doesn't like being interrupted when he's working on his project and... Well, whatever. And I can't go outside, I'll burn. You know that."

"No you won't," Sirius replied, "You just think you're the sort of person who *will* burn and have therefore tricked yourself into believing it in spite of the fact that you *never burn*."

"Pah," said Remus, cracking open the diet coke and taking a long drink. When the can left his mouth, Sirius found himself noticing - rather strangely - the way a couple of leftover drops clung to the now-moistened fullness of Remus' lower lip.

"Anyway," Remus continued, "Why am I telling you this? I'm mad at you."

He looked over at Sirius expectantly, and Sirius felt himself wither. He looked down at his shoes. "Yes," he agreed, "Yes you are. And, ah, quite right too."

Silence fell, and it was awkward in a way that silences never usually were between them, and it made Sirius' skin itch. He was suddenly very aware of how much skin he had - awkward, *awkward* skin that was uncomfortable and strange and stretched uselessly across his bones.

“I really am sorry,” he said, quietly.

Remus sighed.

“I know,” he said, “But I don't – I don't really know if that's enough, this time?”

And, well, *ouch*. Sirius winced.

“I was planning on being so furious,” continued Remus, “And then you tricked me with talk about the weather. You *know* how I love to talk about the weather.”

Sirius nodded. He did know. It was a cruel, cruel trick he had played. “I am a cruel, cruel man.”

“It's nature's television. And yes, you are.”

Another silence, and Sirius nodded again and - for the sake of something to do with his hands - started picking at a loose thread on his jeans. Remus looked at him thoughtfully.

“I *will* forgive you,” he said, and that made the stomach buffalos calm down just a little, “But I just – you just *cannot* do that again, Sirius.”

“I was so drunk!” Sirius exclaimed, the desire to just *speak* and *act* and have his skin stop feeling so much like *skin* bursting out of him. He looked at Remus earnestly, “*So* drunk! So very very drunk! And I just – I don't know, I think I got jealous?”

Remus' eyebrows raised a fraction here, but Sirius was on a roll, so he just carried on and ignored it.

“You know, because of James and Lily and you and Matthew and-”

The eyebrows fell.

“- And I mean Peter's not getting laid any time soon but I do *not* want to know what he does to that car when we're not around, and they all *loved* Matthew and *you* love Matthew and I just felt a bit -”

“I don't love Matthew,” Remus interrupted, quickly.

Sirius blinked, instantly forgetting however that sentence was going to end.

“You don't?”

Remus shook his head. “I mean,” he began, looking a little bit flustered, “I think that I maybe *could*? You know, but I just... I just – I don't want you thinking that I love him. I don't want *you* thinking that. Because I... Don't.”

Sirius blinked again. “Oh,” he said, “Oh, right. Well, ah.” Another blink. It was an unexpected statement which had not been included in the rehearsal he'd had this morning

with James. He didn't know what to do with it. "Well... You really like him, then, can I say that?"

Remus smiled a little. "Yes," he said, "I will concede that."

"Right," said Sirius, awkward, and still so *aware* of his skin, "So – so they really liked him and you really like him and I.. Just.. Yeah. Got jealous. Of – that. Of the whole... Really liking. Thing. Christ almighty it really is hot in here." He tugged at the collar of his shirt, noticing now that he was sweating a great deal.

The stomach buffalo had stopped their rampage, but were now standing very still which made his stomach feel quite heavy, as if there were a leaden weight somewhere within him. He suspected that they were all stood so still because they were staring at him in disbelief. What the hell are you saying? What had previously sounded like a totally reasonable apology now sounded ridiculous, for some reason. It was something in the way Remus was looking at him, like he knew something Sirius didn't, and like he was kind of expecting him to say something else, and like he was sad and happy all at once. The hot weather had Remus just in a t-shirt, and it was kind of weird but also kind of really *not* weird to see him like this, with his arms bare and his chest obvious, free of his usual knitwear armour. Surely Sirius had seen him like this a million times before? So why was he noticing *now*?

The buffalo shifted.

"Eloquent as ever, Black," said Remus, quietly.

"You know me," Sirius shrugged.

Remus raised his eyebrows, but nodded. "Apparently," he said. He cleared his throat and looked away, shuffling some papers on the desk. It was his trademark technique for getting rid of awkward, and it seemed to actually work. "Anyway, I think you should apologize to Matthew. After all, you didn't call me a cunt."

"Thank God," said Sirius, "James definitely would've punched me then."

"He didn't?"

"No, but he came pretty close."

"Pity," said Remus, but he was smiling, and Sirius felt like he could breathe for the first time in days.

Chapter 10

An extremely uncomfortable apology to Matthew followed, in which there was lots of forced laughter and uncomfortable attempts at banter, finished off with some gruff, manly handshakes. Then, with everything once again well in the Houses of Black and Lupin, life among the foursome returned very much to normal. Remus didn't attempt to bring Matthew around again, but he was always there at the edges of conversation and, when James went over to watch a match at Matthew's, Sirius only smashed two glasses and cleaned them up afterwards. Progress!

July's intense heatwave abated as they passed into August, but it stayed warm and – worse than that – thoughts began to turn to their A-Level Exam results. Sirius, being Sirius, wasn't too worried. He knew he'd done well and, besides, as he didn't know where he was going to go or what he was going to do yet anyway, it didn't really matter. James seemed fairly confident but wasn't *quite* at Sirius' level of outrageous cockiness, and he did become slightly more tense as the days passed. Peter alternated between being downright terrified and totally oblivious (but that was generally the case no matter what month it was), and Remus was characteristically panicky and asked them what the date was every morning in case by some miracle he had happened to sleep through until Results Day – August the 19th.

As for how Lily was coping, they only managed to gain information through Remus. He was the only one who had survived relatively unscathed from The Incident; partly because he was the only one of them that Lily didn't actively loathe, and partly because he obviously hadn't been there. James pestered him frequently for information – where she was, what she was doing, what she'd had in her sandwich that day and whether or not she still took two sugars in her tea. He was wise enough to keep out of her way most of the time, but Sirius knew that he had her number – Remus had always been weak for James' puppy dog eyes – and often would catch him texting furtively out of the corner of his eye, and then checking it obsessively for the replies that never came. At one point Sirius performed a very Bad Friend Act – though he justified it as Good Friend Duty – and stole James' phone to peek through the texts.

I'm so sorry, Lily. I'm so embarrassed – probably nowhere near as much as you are, but I am. I have dreadful, awesome friends and they talk me into dreadful things that I think are awesome but which you clearly think are not. And I don't blame you. I expect you are probably right. I'm sorry. I am.

James Potter to Lily Evans, 3.43pm.

Please forgive me? I had good intentions! You've got to admit that Beyonce writes some pumping tunes! And I know you liked the Taylor Swift bit – you can't deny it!

James Potter to Lily Evans, 9.02am.

Sorry, ignore that last text. Being stupid. As per, haha! Sorry. I'm sorry.

James Potter to Lily Evans, 9.08am.

Sad, pathetic little bastard. Sirius didn't bother looking in the Drafts folder, knowing from years of phone stealing experience that it would just say 'I love you' in lots of different ways that never, ever got sent.

Although Lily was doing a remarkably good job of avoiding them, Snape was doing the opposite. Revelling in Lily's hatred of James and the poor boy's humiliation, he seemed to be everywhere they turned, doing ridiculous impressions of a terribly bad singer, a spectacularly talented back up singer and a surprisingly flexible back up dancer. James grew steadily more furious as the days passed. He'd always hated Snape – obviously, they all had, but increasingly James' hatred had always been based on Snape's disgusting intolerance and backwards prejudices, rather than Sirius' which was based largely on the fact that Snape insisted on using their oxygen. In their younger years they had tormented Snape simply for the sake of tormenting him – which Sirius still maintained that he had absolutely deserved – but James had grown out of that now and rarely let Snape's insults actually bother him. The only time James ever got really furious was on the behalf of others, but this time – probably because Lily was involved – he seemed to be getting really, really angry. Sirius loved it.

“I swear to *fucking* God,” James growled, storming into the stable and engaging in a fierce battle with his chainmail as he tried to remove it, “In the middle of our *god damn show*? It's – Jesus, I should have a word with McGonagall, that *cannot* be allowed! I am going to smash that *gigantic* nose right back into his greasy little head. What a *wanker*. What a *twat*.”

“Say what you really feel,” muttered Sirius, slightly less sympathetic than he might usually be as he was nursing a gigantic bruise on his side.

Snape had been stood beside the river for their entire morning performance, doing his irritating impressions and smirking in that patronising manner that was distinctively his. They had managed to finish the whole performance without James going over and pushing Snape right into the river, but it had been very close. When they'd duelled James had attacked Sirius with real force, and Sirius had had to genuinely fight to fend off his sword. At one point the dull blade had smacked him right in the ribs, and he'd keeled over in agony as the audience had laughed and clapped, believing it was all part of the show. In fact it had gone down so well he was considering making it part of their act on a permanent basis.

“Oh, shit, sorry about that man,” said James, having the decency to look concerned for a moment.

“Eh, I can handle it,” Sirius replied, waving him away, “I've always been very tough and strong, James, we know that about me. Anyway, I was enjoying your rant. Snape-hating soothes any wounds. Return to your anger, please.”

But apparently anger had now rendered James momentarily speechless, and so he growled in frustration and kicked a bucket instead. “Why does she like him?” he demanded.

“I don't think she likes him, mate,” said Sirius, “I just think she's better at tolerating him. Crazy bitch.”

“Then how, how can she tolerate him?!” James continued, choosing – wisely – to ignore Sirius' colourful description, “Vile, slimy, disgusting little creature.” He paused from his

bucket attack and turned to look at Sirius. “Do you think he's still out there?”

Sirius sat up straight. “Probably,” he said, “What else does he have to do?”

Sirius paused to allow that evil little thought bubble to form in James mind before asking, at precisely the right moment.. “Why?”

James grinned, and his eyes were all glittery. Sirius grinned right back.

Moments later, they rounded the corner of the stables to find Snape in all of his smirking, slimy, greasy glory. He caught sight of them and scowled, but it quickly melted into something that Sirius assumed was meant to be a kind of 'you-can't-touch-this' smirk.

“Hello Snivellus!” said Sirius merrily, walking alongside James. He always felt a little bit bad ass when they walked exactly in step with each other. Far too much Men In Black as a child will do that to a bloke. James waved and gave a sing song “Hi!” in Snape's direction.

“I love getting a sample of your vocal talent,” Snape sneered, “It really is *magnificent* . Lily was so moved. I think that when she talked about wanting to cut your balls off with rusty hedge clippers, she meant that she *really* loved you.”

“Aw, so sweet,” said James, “Bless her. I always knew she was hiding something.”

“You're *ridiculous*, Potter,” Snape countered. They had come to a stop now and Sirius was leaning on a tree right beside them, and there was only about a metre of distance between James and Snape. “Why can't you just leave her alone? Why can't you just the message? She. Doesn't. Like. You.”

“Why can't *you*?” James demanded, stepping closer. Sirius also shifted a little bit closer, ready to move if occasion demanded it. Or if it didn't, but he wanted to.

“You're so *creepy* , Snivellus,” continued James, lip curling, “You're so *weird* , always hounding her, simpering after her like a little broken-legged dog. You just *lie* and trick her into thinking you're some kind of decent person, but we all know who you're friends with.”

It was a well known fact at school that Snape had started fraternising with the the thugs who didn't attend, but who frequently loitered outside the gates, bottling the ones who looked particularly spoilt (it had been a fairly expensive school they'd attended) and perving on the girls who looked particularly young. They were a downright dreadful group of people - the type that seemed to be carved out of hatred and misery, with a burning desire to destroy anything that didn't fit their bill of straight, white and male. Snape had always avoided being beaten to a pulp by them, mostly due to his his friendship with their leader Tom Riddle – an upper class guy who was devilishly handsome and wonderfully charming, belying his rampant prejudices and spine-chilling ideas of how to deal with said prejudices. Lily knew all this – they knew that she knew all this – but somehow Snape seemed able to guilt her into not wanting to stand on him upon sight.

James was getting up close and personal with Snape now, their noses only inches apart. Snape was backing up towards the river. He might have been an arrogant, slimy jerk but he at

least had the good sense to know that this was a fight from which he would not emerge victorious. Sirius had moved from the tree to walk slowly alongside James but on the other side, so Snape had no way to go but backwards.

“Oh, what?” he snarled, “You gonna push me in the river now, Potter? You need your *boyfriend* here to help you do it?”

Of course, they weren't *actually* going to push him in the river. Sirius probably would have been tempted to if it were solely up to him, but it wasn't, and James wasn't quite that cruel. The river was deep and muddy and they knew from years of PE that Snape wasn't the strongest of swimmers (as far as Sirius was concerned these were all reasons to push him in, but oh well).

“I just want to know,” said James, still taking those slow steps forward down the river bank, “What it is you have on her? Are you blackmailing her with something? Are you *hurting* her?”

“I would never,” Snape growled, clenching his fists.

“Aww, that's right,” James cooed, as patronisingly as possibly, “Because you *like* her, don't you, Snivellus? Pathetic, simpering little boy who thinks he has a chance.”

“Are you describing yourself there, Potter?”

James smirked. “You know, I can deal with the fact that *I'm* not good enough for her, that's fine, whatever, but the idea that *you* are snivelling around her *all day*, acting like you think *you're* good enough? Oh, Snivellus. Oh that really makes my blood boil.”

“It does,” said Sirius, “You should see how worked up he gets. It's upsetting.”

They were still walking slowly forwards and Snape was still walking slowly backwards. He was looking between the two of them, a little nervous now as he attempted to figure some way out. There was none. They were dangerously close to the river now.

“This is so typical of you two,” Snape hissed, “Arrogant bastards, walking around here like you own the place, embarrassing people at work, pushing other people in to rivers. Well come on! Come on, if you're going to!”

James and Sirius both stopped in their tracks. Snape was right on the edge of the river now.

“We're not going to,” said James, “Not today.”

Snape looked more than a little relieved, but he quickly steeled his face back into that look of utter hatred that he usually wore.

“We just wanted to remind you how easy it would be,” continued Sirius, “Wouldn't it be *so* easy, James?”

“*So* easy!” said James, and he put one finger in the centre of Snape's chest, “So. Easy.”

Sirius watched the two young men look at each other for a second, hatred fizzling tangibly between them, and then James took a step backwards. "Let's go, Sirius," he said, and Sirius was happy to oblige – giving Snape a little wave and a winning smile and beginning to head off with James.

Snape snorted with derisive laughter and then took a step away from the river bank. Then, the ridiculous happened. With a shriek that was so deliciously girly Sirius wished he had a voice recorder, Snape stepped on a patch of particularly slippery grass and fell backwards, flailing his arms about as if thin air would give him something to hang on to and then, when it didn't, landing with an almighty crash in the river.

Well, fuck.

It seemed to happen in slow motion. One minute Snape was standing upright and Sirius and James were walking away with their consciences clean, and the next Snape was submerged beneath the water of the river. And he *couldn't bloody swim* .

"Shit!" said Sirius.

The colour drained from James' face but he acted without hesitation, jumping into the river before Sirius had a chance to stop him. "What are you doing ?" he yelled, flailing desperately at the ripples on the surface, "Don't you dare die for him, Potter! Don't you *fucking* dare!"

They were probably only under the surface for a matter of seconds, but for Sirius it felt like hours as he stared helplessly at the bubbles on the surface. And then, finally, James emerged like some kind of creature of the deep, his hair plastered to his forehead and his glasses skewed on his nose, and Snape struggling in his arms.

"Fucking – stop it!" James said breathlessly, dragging Snape towards the river bank, "You're gonna – fucking – kill us! I'm trying to – god damn – save you, don't make me – shit – kill you!"

He dumped a spluttering Snape on the river bank, and then crawled out alongside him. He flopped down on the muddy ground, and Sirius dropped to his knees.

"James!" he said, a little bit more hysterically than he would later report, "James, talk to me!" He slapped his best friend's cheek. "James, can you hear me??"

"Fuck off, Sirius, I know how to bloody swim," muttered James, batting his hand away. "Check the ungrateful dickweed first."

"Oh, right," said Sirius. He looked at Snape nervously. "Uh.. All right?"

"Yes," Snape spat, getting to his feet and wiping his face with his hands, "No thanks to either of you bastards ."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" demanded James incredulously, staring up at them from the ground, "I just saved your life !"

"It was your fault I fell in in the first place! Both of you!"

“*Our* fault?!” Sirius shouted, “Our fault you're so fucking incompetent you can't even watch where you're going and end up *drowning* yourself? He bloody saved you!”

“A decision I imagine I will come to regret,” snapped James, finally getting to his feet.

Snape's response was silenced by a screech of “Severus!” from Lily Evans, who was running down the bank in their direction, looking panicked and furious.

“Severus, are you okay?” she asked, panting as she came to a halt beside them. She seized Snape by the arms and checked him over, brushing a stray piece of river dirt from his cheek. Sirius felt James tense beside him.

“I'm fine, Lily, I'm fine,” he assured her in a bit of a mumble, going uncharacteristically shy and awkward. James scowled.

Reassured of Snape's well being, the inevitable came, and she wheeled on James looking even more angry than she had at the time of The Incident. Sirius had vague memories of a happy and smiling girl with razor sharp wit and a glittering intelligence being James' object of affections once upon a time, but these days, she seemed in a perpetual state of rage. He suspected that he may have had something to do with that.

“What,” she began, her voice and body shaking with the effort that it was taking not to throw James back into the river, “Is the *matter* with you, James Potter? What the *hell* is the matter with you? Just when I think – just when I *dare* to think that you might have a scrap of something resembling a *conscience*, you do this! What the *HELL* is the matter with you?!”

James blinked at her. “What?”

“I *saw* you!” she exclaimed, flailing her arms around like a madwoman, “I saw you – from the tower! I watched you, Potter, and *you*, Black!”

“Don't look at me,” Sirius muttered, raising his arms in surrender and taking a step back.

Something very strange was happening to James. Rather than babbling nonsense and going pink at the edges and making ridiculous jokes as he shook like a leaf in the wind, as usual, he actually seemed to be going rather still. The colour was draining from his face rather than increasing, and he was standing his ground instead of hopping from one foot to another as if there was a ferret in his boxers.

“And what exactly did you see, *Evans*?” he asked, as calmly as any man could who was drenched in muddy water and being screamed at by the love of his life.

Like Sirius, Lily was momentarily taken aback by this response – no doubt she, too, had expected a stream of elaborate apologies and declarations of undying affection.

“I -” she began, pausing for a second before scowling and regaining her composure, “I saw you *push him in*, Potter! How could you, how *could* you? You're such a bully! That's all you've ever been! Acting all righteous and noble and thinking so much of yourself -”

“ *I think so much of myself?*” James demanded, interrupting her for the first time in... Well, ever. Sirius' mouth fell open .

“Y-yes!” she spluttered, going even redder in the face, “You walked around school like you owned the place and you do the same thing here! Acting like you can do whatever you want and get away with it – even *pushing people into rivers!* People who *cannot bloody swim!* Which you KNOW!”

“He didn't -” Sirius began, but James put a hand on his chest and shook his head.

“Leave it, Sirius,” he said, and Sirius silenced. He noticed with a surge of fresh hatred that Snape was watching this whole scene with a delight akin to winning the lottery, but decided against pushing him back into the river. Probably wouldn't help. Probably.

James ran his hands through his hair and heaved a heavy sigh. It seemed as if, in that instant, all the fight went out of him. He didn't even look angry, he just looked so achingly *sad*.

“You know what, Lily?” he said, “You see what you want to see, alright? I don't care any more. I don't. I can't. It's too tiring – honestly, I am fucking exhausted of playing his stupid game with you. So fine! I pushed him in, yeah, 'cause that's exactly like the kind of *heartless bastard* I am. All right? You happy now?”

She stared at him, looking bewildered and intrigued, but mostly just shocked. Sirius knew how she felt. This was a spectacular turn of events.

“I'll leave you alone,” James continued, “I'll leave you alone, I'll leave Snape alone, I'll leave everyone alone. All right? We're going off to uni anyway and you won't have to see me again and it's – it's fine. I'm sorry for pushing him in. I'm sorry for – well, all of it. I'm sorry, Lily.”

He looked at her and she looked at him, and Sirius felt the uncomfortable sensation that he was watching something he shouldn't be. Snape frowned.

“Well,” Lily said, aiming to sound stern but ending up with uncertain, as she folded her arms over her chest, “Great. I'm not going to *thank* you, if that's what you're after.”

James laughed, but there was no humour in it. “I'm not after anything,” he assured her, “Come on, Sirius. Let's go.”

Feeling very much as if something either wonderful or dreadful had just happened, and he couldn't decide which, Sirius stumbled after James. The moment called for silence – James did not look as if he wanted to be talking – and they walked away, leaving a stunned Lily behind them. For the first time ever, Snape and Sirius had something in common. Complete and utter confusion.

It was only when they got back to the stables, and James immediately sunk not onto a haystack but onto the floor, that Sirius felt brave enough to speak.

“You alright, man?” he asked, feeling that the moment called for gruff manliness. He was good at that. Sort of.

James didn't answer for a second, taking a moment to shrug and swallow hard and look at anything that wasn't Sirius. "Yeah," he eventually said, unconvincingly, "Whatever, you know?"

Sirius sat down beside him, amongst the hay and the dirt. He ruffled James' hair for him.

"Yeah," he said, "I know."

James smirked. "No you don't," he pointed out.

Sirius took a second to consider this. He really didn't.

"Well," he said, putting his arm around James' shoulders. "I tried."

Chapter 11

“Is he all right?” asked Peter, nervously.

They were sitting on The Mound – the highest part of the grounds with a spectacular view out over the countryside – with their legs dangling over the edge of the ancient stone wall. James was gazing down and looking like he was seriously considering throwing himself off. Sirius put a hand on his shoulder, just to make sure.

“I don't think he'll ever be all right again,” said Sirius, patting his friend, “Will you buddy?”

James stuck out his bottom lip and shook his head. “Woe is me and I am woe.”

“Shakespeare would be proud,” Remus promised, sitting on the other side of James.

It had been three days since James had – for the first time in his life – willingly walked away from Lily Evans. They hadn't seen her since. Sirius had stolen his phone like the possessive girlfriend that Remus occasionally said he was and looked through it, but no communication attempts had been made. There wasn't even anything in the drafts. Sirius was beginning to think that his friend was genuinely broken. Not just broken hearted, but quite literally broken. That he had *genuinely* malfunctioned. Even two cases of beer, a Gilmore Girls marathon and another re-watch of Dirty Dancing hadn't helped. Sirius was at a loss.

“Do you want to go in the Pageant Playground?” he asked.

James sighed and rested his head on Sirius' shoulder. “No.”

“Wow,” Peter muttered, “It is bad.”

“Shh.”

The Pageant Playground was right on the outskirts of the Castle, and it was basically just a smaller version of the actual Castle designed to be pillaged and plundered by anybody under the age of 12. Sirius had found James sitting in there when Lily had rejected him last summer, smoking a cigarette and lecturing some eight year olds on why they should never, ever love a woman. Sirius had sat down and joined in, encouraging them heartily, and it was only when Remus found them half an hour later that they had been forced to leave. Since that fateful July day it had become a place of refuge for all.

“What about Lizzie?” asked Remus, perking up, “Do you want to go and see Lizzie?”

“Yeah!” said Sirius, “Good ol' Queenie, she'll tell you what to do!”

A couple of years ago Warwick Castle had inexplicably installed a lifesize figure of the current Queen Elizabeth in a section of the castle known as the Royal Weekend Party. It was

a walk-through event full of lots of figures from the twenties that Remus knew everything about and Sirius didn't care to find out, and then all of a sudden there was good old Lizzie tucked away in a well preserved drawing room. Since every other figure was from the twenties and she was so clearly not her presence served no real purpose, but the boys often turned to her for advice in times of trouble and she never failed to deliver. When Peter had panicked extensively over what he should apply to study at university, something in her eyes had said geography, and so geography it was.

Something like a smile tugged at the edges of James' mouth.

"Yeah," he said fondly, "She's always got my back. Okay." He shrugged, hopping down from the wall. "Why not?"

"Good," said Remus, "Maybe she'll tell me what to do if – sorry, *when* I fail miserably on Thursday."

"Shush!" demanded Sirius, as the four of them headed down from the Mound. "We do not speak of such things."

Exam results were due out in no fewer than three days, and Sirius had decreed that under no circumstances would they be allowed to talk about them until they had the envelopes in their hands. Remus knew to be silent. Peter, sadly, did not.

"Oh as *if* you're going to fail!" he said, a bit hysterically, "None of you will fail, you'll all be brilliant as usual and I will be stupid as usual and I'll never get in anywhere! Anywhere!!"

"Don't be silly," said Remus, patting Peter's shoulder as Sirius rolled his eyes, "You'll be fine, I'm sure you will. *Me* on the other hand..."

He was quickly shouted down by Sirius and Peter. There wasn't a snowball's chance in hell that Remus would do badly in those exams, and they all knew that. Including James, though he was saying nothing, simply staring at his feet as they scuffed the grass that he walked on.

"I feel like this entire summer has just consisted of you moping over Evans," said Sirius to James, "No, I'm sorry, I feel *the past five years* has consisted of you moping over Evans." He wasn't trying to be unkind and he didn't really sound it, either, but his sympathy was tinged by a slight edge. Honestly, it *was* boring just watching James be sad, and it was depressing and frustrating too because he couldn't do anything about it. "You did the right thing, Prongs. It wasn't gonna happen."

Remus looked at Sirius with a stern expression, but he just shrugged. "I'm being nice!" he insisted.

"You bloody well are not," said Remus.

"No, he is," James said, "In his own sick, twisted little way."

Sirius smiled cheerfully and flipped two fingers at Remus. "See?" he said, and Remus

responded by flipping two right back.

It was warm again, but today the gentle breeze made the humidity a little less stifling. It was basically the perfect day for gallivanting in rivers and stealing Peter's ice creams and rolling down hills, but as they walked through the tourists Sirius felt as if they were all trapped in James' own little Bubble of Gloom. Looking up at the cloud scattered sky, Sirius half expected to see an Eeyore style rain cloud above them. Possibly the raindrops would spell out 'Lily Evans'. Bloody Lily Evans.

Sirius swung his arm around James' shoulders as they rounded past the Chapel, Great Hall and State Rooms. The castle really was a pretty damn fine place to work; huge and old (Peter's two main criteria for women, ha ha ha ha) with unexplored rooms and stairway mazes and ground that stretched out as far as the eye could see. The first summer they'd worked here had been a lot like the first two years at their boarding school – they'd done nothing but explore and scamper and discover until they knew every inch of the place. Knowing how to get from one side of the Castle to the other in the quickest way possible (often involving turret climbing) was a particularly useful skill, especially where McGonagall was concerned.

“Alright Andromeda?” Sirius asked the grumpy looking woman on the door.

She smiled a little when she saw the group. “Hi, boys,” she said, “Looking for Lizzie I assume?”

They all nodded, and James did his best to look like a pleasant human being. It mostly came across that he was constipated, but Andromeda – Sirius' only half-decent cousin – had enough tact not to mention it.

“In you go then,” she said, unclipping the red velvet rope, “Check she's behaving, for me!”

“Yes sir!” Sirius replied, saluting in her direction and then dragging James through the entrance – the other two in tow.

“Is she your favourite cousin, Sirius?” Peter asked.

“She's the only cousin I can stand,” Sirius replied, “And therefore yes. She wins by default. Pretty cool lady though. I think she's shacking up with Ted Tonks – you remember, he was a couple of years above us? Captain of the football team for a bit?”

“Oh yeah,” said James, “Had a little bit of a man crush on him for a while.”

“You have a man crush on anyone who can kick a ball,” Remus pointed out, as they ignored all the other rooms – already seen a million times over – in their pursuit of the Queen, “Maybe that's why you're so terribly fond of yourself?”

James shrugged. “I'll concede.”

“Who's your ultimate man crush, Remus?” Peter asked.

Remus laughed. "I don't have man crushes, Pete," he explained, "I just have actual crushes."

"Oh, right."

"Who is it, though?" pressed Sirius, interested, "Like – of all the men living and breathing today, which one would you like best?"

His attention dropped from James for a moment, looking back over his shoulder at Remus. Remus raised an eyebrow at him.

"You'd like to know, mm?" he asked, and Sirius shrugged, nodding simultaneously. "Jesse Eisenberg."

"What?!" Sirius shrieked, and James muttered something about "well, obviously, you made us watch the Social Network like eighteen times..."

"It's a good movie," Remus said indignantly, "Their love is *heartbreaking*."

"Oh, really? You should write a fan fiction about it," James teased, finally wearing what looked like an actual smile. It was in reference to a time that Sirius had hijacked Remus' laptop and found an entire folder marked 'Wardo/Mark smut'. That had been a particularly amusing Tuesday afternoon.

"Leave me alone," scowled Remus, "Anyway, what's wrong with Jesse Eisenberg?"

"Nothing, I guess..." said Sirius, distastefully, "Just, you know, the lack of handsome-ness. You should fancy someone like – I don't know, Ben Barnes? Tom Sturridge? Gary Oldman?"

"Gary Oldman? Really?" James asked.

Sirius shrugged. "Don't you think he's cute?"

"Not really my type," said Remus, but he was looking at Sirius with that frustrating 'I know something you don't' expression. It was maddening, but it happened so frequently these days that Sirius just let it pass.

"Anyway," Remus continued, "Who's your ultimate man crush, Sirius?"

"Patrick Swayze," he replied instantly, no need for consideration, "Obviously."

James nodded wisely. "That's fair," he said.

"I think we walked right past the Queen's room?" said Peter.

Sirius sighed. "No, we didn't," he said, "Remember – you always have to double back on yourself around the fourth bathroom if you want to avoid the tourists?"

Peter looked blank.

“Honestly,” Sirius sighed, “How you remain upright so consistently is beyond me. One day I’m gonna draw you a map. Hey! Maybe I’ll draw you a map!”

“We’re here,” said Remus, and James smiled happily.

They headed into the room that was, as usual, deserted. There she was – magnificent Elizabeth, looking serene and wise and as if her mere presence could cure a broken heart. James sat down on the floor by her feet, and they all slumped around him.

“This is like a pilgrimage for us, isn’t?” Remus mused, “It’s a bit like Canterbury Tales, how we all share stories on the way here and then, you know, we arrive at this shrine. It’s quite interesting, the things we make into shrines in our modern age.”

They stared at him. James looked murderous.

“ You’re *ruining* it, Moony,” said Peter.

"Are you questioning our sovereign's inherent holiness?" Sirius demanded.

“Sorry. I’ll be quiet.”

“Bloody right. Do you feel better yet Prongsie old boy?” asked Sirius, cross legged beside him.

“A bit,” said James, and he rested his head on Sirius' shoulder.

Chapter 12

Thursday morning arrived with all the merriment and cheer of a funeral procession. James was ashen with nerves, Remus was clutching his stomach and Peter had turned slightly green. Sirius, on the other hand, was fine and dandy. The morning felt suspiciously like a hangover, and he rarely got those. One of his many life skills.

“Well, this is merry,” he observed, after an agonizing forty eight seconds of silence.

“Shut up,” said James, “Shut up or I will eat you. I shit you not Sirius Black I will put your horrendous body between my teeth and I will *eat* it.”

“And I will help,” added Remus.

“Kinky.”

“Can you all please be quiet!!!” Peter shrieked, “I am trying to get us all there on time and I cannot concentrate with you all wittering on incessantly! I mean you, Sirius! I mean it!!!”

James took a moment from his very pale form of panicking to raise his eyebrows at Sirius. It was a rare day when Peter Pettigrew shrieked at Sirius in a way that wasn't slightly fan girly. Clearly, the situation was dire.

Sirius hated silences, and always had. They just felt so *unnatural*, so pregnant with possibility, such wasted opportunities for hilarity and insults and good old fashioned banter. He wasn't *totally* incapable of functioning as an adult and did appreciate the need for silence in certain situations, but spending too much time in his own head often ended up depressing and bewildering and downright strange. Recently the incessant silence of his own brain had kept him up at night, with the gnawing sense that he was missing something, but being completely unable to figure out what it was.

“Well I don't understand why my talking is gonna make us get there any slower,” Sirius started to say, but was silenced by a swift punch in the ribs from James before he even reached 'gonna'.

The journey ploughed on with nothing but the dull drone of Radio 4 – Remus said it calmed him down – to abate Sirius' need for constant noise. The real issue he had with not talking at this present time was that it actually *did* turn his thoughts towards the imminent exam results, and he'd be damned if he joined the others in becoming a panicking loser who thought that letters on paper defined who you were going to be. He'd received a letter through the post this morning that had given him a clear option of who he *could* be, and honestly it was a tempting offer. He just didn't like where it had come from.

The grey brick of their old school building loomed, not far from them on the horizon.

“I’m gonna be sick,” Remus muttered, and the greenish tinge of his face suggested that this was not necessarily an empty threat.

“Not in my car please Remus,” said Peter, quivering like a little mouse as they pulled into the carpark.

It was sort of weird to be back here again, an hour outside of Warwick, in the building where they’d all met and then lived together for seven years. This was the final time that they had any legitimate excuse to come back here – to the ancient architecture that loomed over them, imposing and beautiful, as if simultaneously demonstrating the fear of doing badly and the triumph of doing well. Sirius gazed up at the school and felt a little skip somewhere around rib level. There were so many memories housed within these walls, and he thought about waxing lyrical to his friends about it, but then decided that he’d probably get his head sliced off for speaking.

Also he’d probably sound a bit girly. Wouldn’t want that.

It was quite funny, watching his friends panic around him. Having known them all for such a long time their own particular brands of coping were now second nature to him, and it was laughable how predictable they all were. Peter became slightly hysterical, speaking in a strangely upper class voice and shaking like a leaf in the wind, whilst Remus visibly fought the urge to vomit and James wore the grim but determined impression of a man leading his troops into battle. He even spoke like one.

“Right then, gentleman,” he said, as they all sat very still in car, waiting to dismount, “Once more unto the breach.”

As the other three unclipped their seatbelts Sirius bounded out of the car, and breathed in deep. The ancient smell of the ancient school was familiar in a way that felt like Sirius supposed home was meant to feel like, and he wore a dizzy little grin at being back here again. He caught Remus’ eye and the poor boy bravely attempted to smile at Sirius, no doubt recognizing that expression, but the sickness of nerves only made his expression look more like he was about to throw up. Still, Sirius appreciated the effort.

“Nice try, Moony,” said Sirius, clapping a hand on his shoulder, “Do try not to be sick on my shoes though, mm? They’re new. Now come on, let’s go and sort you stupid lot out.”

“I am stupid,” Remus moaned, leaning into Sirius’ touch a bit, “I am so very, very stupid.”

“That is *not* the kind of attitude I want to hear,” James demanded.

“From your troops?” asked Sirius.

“Ye- no? Oh, am I doing it again?”

“Treating us all like soldiers?!” Peter exclaimed, louder than necessary, “Yes, James, you always do this, always! Always!!!”

“Whereas you, Peter,” said Sirius, “Are the paradigm of unpredictability.”

Remus was the only one who heard this remark, and the smile he gave Sirius then looked a little more relaxed and a little less sickening. Only slightly, mind. The smile faded a little when he saw who was in front of them.

“Oh, shit,” he said, and Sirius' eyes immediately followed Remus'.

“Oh, shit,” he echoed.

“What do we do?” asked Remus.

Lily was walking a little bit in front of them with her parents and a sincerely grumpy looking younger sister. Like James, Lily was wearing an expression of grim determination – her face told the world that she would get through this day, god damn it, and it was times like this that Sirius was forced to grudgingly admit to himself that she and James would have made a pretty great team. Or a pretty formidable one, at least.

James and Peter were walking slightly behind Sirius and Remus, and neither of them had spotted her yet.

“Steer left, steer left!” Sirius hissed, and Remus automatically did so.

“Why are we going this way?” James asked, bewildered, but obedient to the last.

Sirius waited a few moments before responding, making sure that they were safely away from the Lily Evans line of fire.

“Oh, I – uh,” he began, having not thought this far ahead, “Got lost.”

James stared at him.

“Riiiiight..” he said slowly, as Peter jumped up and down next to him. “Well, uh, okay. Results are this way, unless you'd rather continue to wander lonely as a cloud? And Pete, please stop jumping about mate, you're making me dizzy.”

“I! Can't! Help it!”

All around them was a veritable smorgasboard of emotions. Those who were clutching opened envelopes looked gleeful, distraught, ambivalent, shocked or like they were simply relieved to have the whole thing over and done with (which Sirius suspected was how he was going to feel).

“I'll get them then, shall I? In case one of you three decide to spare us all the anguish and eat them up before they're opened?”

Since this wasn't actually that ludicrous of a proposition, James, Remus and Peter nodded in unison.

Walking to the envelope collection point Sirius began to feel something that did actually resemble what he could only assume to be nerves. Of course he'd been nervous before – apologizing to Remus for the Matthew Incident, for example – but feeling anxious in relation to something to do with school was so very novel that it was mostly just an amusing sensation. Sort of like somebody was tickling his stomach from the inside. Most odd.

He grabbed the four envelopes as quickly as he could and headed back to his friends, who were huddled together (Remus was strategically placed to shield James catching sight of a certain red headed female).

He handed the envelopes out. Peter snatched it from his hands greedily, Remus took it gingerly like it held a bomb within, and James gritted his teeth, and took it like a man.

“On three?” Sirius suggested.

They nodded.

“One!!!” shouted Peter.

“Uh, two,” mumbled Remus.

“Three,” said James.

They opened the envelopes.

“To friendship!” exclaimed James, splashing his beer glass against Sirius', “To university! To London! To getting the hell of this place! To not missing anybody whose names rhymes with Smilly Smevans! To exam results! Hooorrrraayyy!”

“Chug!” shouted Sirius, and they did exactly that.

There was a pub called The Three Broomsticks just outside the school grounds, and it was where the whole year had automatically congregated after getting their results. It was the definition of bustling; packed to the corners and full to the brim with merriment, excitement, laughter and drunkenness. Remus, James, Sirius and Peter were crowded at a round table near the bar, empty pint glasses littered all about them and full glasses being rapidly consumed. Sirius was bouncing around like a puppy on crack, Remus looked slightly dizzy with the extent of his own success, James was right back to his brilliantly arrogant self and, although Peter hadn't gotten into his first choice university, he just seemed pleased to have gotten in anywhere.

“Well, haven't we done well?” Sirius grinned, wiping the beer foam of his face and swinging his arms around Peter's shoulders. “Remus off to Exeter to do wanky Classics and wanky French – though you clearly could have gotten into like, Harvard with those grades. What was it again?”

He knew perfectly well, but also knew that Remus was secretly quite proud of himself - an occurrence so rare that Sirius wanted to make sure his friend knew that it was actually all right to be pleased.

“Four A*s,” he muttered with a little self-deprecating grin. James and Sirius roared their approval, banging their glasses on the table until Remus finally shouted loudly enough at them to shut up. Peter hiccupped, but it was definitely a very approving hiccup.

“Oh, and Peter,” said James fondly. He was grinning properly for the first time in weeks, and it was so incredibly uplifting that Sirius credited that – rather than their results – for the joyous atmosphere in the room. “Peter, with your abundance of C's, off to Aberystwyth to embark on a glorious geographical career.” He leaned over and pressed a firm kiss to Peter's forehead. “We're all very proud of you.”

“Oh, fuck off,” Peter hiccupped, but he was grinning. They really *were* all proud of him - three C's was pretty damn impressive for Peter, and he had realistically always been aiming too high with his first choice of King's College London. Which, incidentally, was where James had got into. He was going to study Modern History with a view to then maybe getting involved in something vaguely political – which always made Remus look a little bit worried when mentioned.

“And meeee!” James said, raising his glass into the air and spilling some beer over his arm, “Two A*s and one A, what a GENIUS I am!”

“And so modest!” Sirius said.

“*So* modest!” agreed James vehemently, “Modest and handsome and SINGLE! Gloriously, magnificently single and potent and raring to go.”

“That's the spirit buddy,” said Sirius, patting him on the back.

“And *you*,” said James, sitting back down in his seat (when had he even stood up?) and taking Sirius' face in his hands. Sirius wriggled. “You, you clever little monkey with your three A's, not even going anywhere and wasting away your genius!”

“As all good geniuses do,” Sirius pointed out, sitting back in his chair, “Geniuses? Genii?”

“Good Lord,” said Remus.

“Hush, Moony. I was just thinking maybe I'll let you come and sleep on my floor in my swanky Parisian apartment.”

“Come and clean it, you mean.”

“Good man.”

“You're moving to Paris?” asked Peter.

“Yes, Peter, because that is the siren call of all disinherited aristocratic geniusmen! I shall live in an attic and sleep with prostitutes and cut off my own ear and everyone will cry about what a terrible waste it'll be and, oh, it'll all be so tragic,” said Sirius, “And then I'll write a book about it and it'll be exactly the kind of mental thing that Remus will get a hard-on for.”

Remus nearly choked on his beer.

“Why are we talking about Remus' hard-on?” asked James, suddenly returning to the conversation after getting momentarily lost staring at the buxom lady known only as Madam Rosmerta behind the bar.

“We are not talking about Remus' – *anything*,” said Remus, firmly, going slightly pink and glaring at Sirius.

“Is that the kind of thing you only let Matthew talk about?” Sirius asked. He rested his chin in his hand and leaned in closer to Remus, grinning and, for some alcohol-muddled reason, interested.

Remus gave a short, humourless bark of laughter and looked away. He wasn't the sort of person to always be going on about his love life by *any* stretch of the imagination, but it was unusual for him to avoid the topic all together – and in fact, now that Sirius thought about, the M-word hadn't come up in conversation for a while now.

He wasn't given much time to dwell on it, however, as Lily chose that moment to walk through the door and – as if he'd been born with some innate knowledge of where she was at any given moment – James' head swivelled towards her. With her parents and her friends she was looking excited and happy, so presumably she'd done well and got into wherever it was she was going, but the effect her appearance had on James was anything but positive. His center of gravity seemed to drop by about four inches and he visibly slumped, as if he were sinking back into himself and becoming smaller, and the brilliant smile fell from his face.

Aside from pushing his drink towards him, Sirius didn't really know what to do. His stomach clenched uncomfortably and he felt horribly bad for James, and also slightly (unfairly, he knew) annoyed at Lily for ruining a perfectly brilliant lunch time. He looked at Remus who looked at him back, wearing a similarly pained expression.

“James!” Peter exclaimed, snapping them out of the momentary silence and proving himself to once again be the most unlikely savior of a situation, “I am going to get you a *drink*.”

“A drink?” said James.

“A drink!” Sirius declared, “Yes, good man Peter! Good man! And hey, Prongs, maybe you can even hit on old Rosie over there? It's about time, brother. It's about time.”

James smiled. “You reckon?” he said, and Sirius nodded.

“I reckon.”

Peter grabbed James and hauled him over to the bar, babbling on about something totally irrelevant. Occasionally – usually when he'd had a few beers – Peter demonstrated a remarkable ability to calm James down and just generally make him feel better. Sirius suspected it was because he could just talk and talk and talk until everything became white noise and nothing mattered anymore, but maybe, amongst all his ridiculousness, Peter actually had something of a brain.

“D'you think he'll be okay?” Remus asked.

Sirius shrugged. “I honestly don't know,” he admitted.

James was the sort of person who, on the surface, seemed like he'd always be okay. Exciting, funny, capable and intelligent, he came across as the sort of guy to whom good stuff just sort of *happened*, and that everything would pretty much always work out in his favour. That had been the case in his childhood, until of course he'd met Lily and she'd proved to him that he couldn't always get what he wanted just because he wanted it. It had either been the best thing for his character or the worst. Sirius could never decide.

Remus shook his head. “Poor thing,” he said, then looked over at Sirius. “So. What are you gonna do with your fancy three A's?”

“Don't mock me,” Sirius glared, “Four A*s is just greedy and superfluous. All it shows is that you're insane enough to take four subjects in the first place, and actually *try* at them. Madness. I've half a mind to send you off to an asylum.”

“You'll never take me alive,” said Remus, raising his eyebrows.

“Who said anything about alive?” Sirius whispered, and Remus feigned horror.

There was a moment of silence that followed, and Sirius suddenly felt a little bit uncomfortable. The urge to tell Remus about the letter he'd received this morning seized him, even though he'd barely thought about it since opening. He could feel it bubbling up inside him and panicked, attempting to suppress it but god damn it he'd never learnt how to suppress anything and –

“I got a letter from Oxford this morning,” he blurted out.

Remus blinked at him. “You did?” he asked, slowly.

Sirius nodded. “I did.”

For some reason, he felt a little bit nervous. Remus put down his drink and looked at Sirius. “And?” he pressed, “What did it say?”

“Just that -” Sirius began, and shifted awkwardly in his seat, “I can go. If I want to. Like. There. I can go there. To study. To learn things. At Oxford. I can-”

“Yes,” Remus said, “Yes, I understand how university works.” He was doing that thing again – that emotionless, unreadable voice that matched his totally emotionless, unreadable expression. “Are you going, then?”

That was definitely not something he needed to think about. He shook his head.

“No way,” he said, “No, I doubt they even looked at my grades before sending me that. It's just a stupid old family tradition that I expect Mother dearest forgot to cancel or was somehow unable to prevent. It's bullshit.”

“Bullshit?” Remus repeated, with a raised eyebrow.

Sirius nodded, but didn't meet Remus' eye. He took a long swig of his beer and glanced over to where James was flirting outrageously with the barmaid who seemed pleased, to say the least. James had a way of making everybody around him feel absolutely brilliant.

When he looked back, Remus was chewing on his bottom lip. He glanced up, and their eyes met.

“You're an idiot, Sirius,” he said, earnestly, “You really are. I can't – I just, I can't even *believe* you sometimes.”

Sirius stared at him. “Uh, sorry?”

“It's – it's Oxford, Sirius! Oxford University, and knowing you it's probably like, fucking *Christ Church* you've got into or something -”

It was Magdalen, but Sirius decided against mentioning it.

“It's the opportunity of a lifetime, and you're sitting here being too proud to take it! You're so – god damn it, you're so *brilliant*, and you don't give yourself enough credit for it – you just sit about and talk about how you're gonna live this terribly bohemian lifestyle and I know it's just an act, I *know* it's not who you are or what you want, and most importantly *you* know how much more you're capable of!”

Sirius continued to stare at him. The way Remus was talking, all passionate and caring and earnest, there was something... Well, there was something quite spectacularly endearing about it. He knew he probably should have been offended – after all, Remus was basically calling him a waster – but he wasn't. He felt... Well, he felt loved, really.

Still not gonna go to Oxford though.

“You know I'd have killed to go to Oxford,” Remus continued.

“You could have!” said Sirius, feeling confident that this was something he definitely should say, “Grades like that – Jesus, you could have. I'm not the only one who sells myself short here.”

Remus' eyebrows shot up into his hairline, but then they were straight back into a scowl. "Don't be ridiculous, Sirius," he snapped.

"See?" said Sirius, and he almost laughed with the ridiculousness of it all. He held onto Remus' upper arm, leaning forwards. "See?"

Remus looked at him. In leaning forwards they'd become a lot closer, and now their noses were only inches apart. Sirius was always very touch feely and he always got up in people's spaces, but Remus usually shied away whenever Sirius attempted to do it to him, so the fact that he was just staying still now made their proximity very obvious.

Remus fixed him with that same slow, searching gaze that Sirius remembered from earlier on in the summer, after they'd gatecrashed Remus' date. There was something very soft at the edges about it; something that felt quiet and secret, and just for him, even in the midst of the crowded pub.

Ever a master of timing, Peter's voice invaded the calm and brought the crowded pub right back in between them. Hastily Sirius let go of Remus' arm, and Remus jumped back as if he'd been scolded.

"Guess what!" Peter exclaimed, bouncing around James who just looked a little bit lost, "He got her number!!"

"Great!" said Sirius and Remus in perfect unison.

James laughed at their unity.

"Like an old married couple," he observed, and sat down between them.

And although there was only a James Potter to seperate them, Remus suddenly felt very, very far away.

Chapter 13

Somehow, quite out of nowhere, it was the end of summer. They only had seven days left of work and then it would be September, and Warwick Castle would relinquish its summer schedule and off they would go, on their merry ways to the world of adulthood. Only a few short months had passed and it had felt like nothing, nothing at all, when once it had seemed that it might last forever. It had stretched before them like an endless horizon of possibility and frivolity, and now it was ebbing away and Sirius felt an aching, desperate urge to seize hold, and never let go.

He knew that things always got more impressive with time. School had felt boring and tiresome and unnecessary when they'd been there, but looking back now in the haze of nostalgia it seemed like the greatest seven years of his life. If he put his Sensible Brain in (always a long and arduous process) he knew that he'd look back on this summer with just as much fondness as those years, but being very aware as he was that this was The Final Week, he just wanted to get out and do things .

James, on the other hand, just wanted to pack. Did he not understand how incredibly dull he had become? That these were their golden days ? Oh, woe for Sirius Black and his newly-boring friends.

He had been slumped in front of the TV all day watching Gilmore Girls, whilst James had been upstairs deciding which clothes were going to be most likely to get him laid at university. He had foolishly asked for Sirius' opinion on a few, but had got the message when Sirius had said 'absolutely not, under no circumstances, you look a skinny little weasel' to no fewer than fourteen identical t-shirts.

“Jaaaames!” Sirius yelled, “James, entertain meeeee.”

“You're being entertained!” James shouted back, “Gilmore Girls is one of the finest forms of entertainment ever granted to us!”

Sirius nodded though nobody could see him. Though he knew he probably *should* have felt guilty for wasting away the summer watching reruns with his friend, he was fairly confident that it had been a spectacular use of their time - even rivalling the Great Masterchef Summer of 2009. They had learnt so much in just a few short weeks.

(Admittedly most of the lessons were in how to create soul crushing tension with a blamange, rather than anything that could actually be considered useful.

“But I've seen this episode,” Sirius argued.

He heard James sigh and sensed him scowl, followed by the stomping of feet down stairs. He appeared in the doorway and Sirius turned his head towards him, puppy dog eyes and downturned mouth.

“Don't do your pulling face at me,” said James, then pushed Sirius' arm off the side of the sofa and sat down. “What do you even want to do? Remus is off with Matthew and Pete's got yoga.”

He'd started this peculiar pursuit a few weeks previous and the other three had collectively decided to just roll with it. Apparently it “calmed” him.

“Traitors,” said Sirius, switching off the TV. “Hey! Why don't we go to the park?”

James snorted with laughter. “Dude, we spent our formative years in the park wishing we were old enough for the pub, and now that we are old enough for the pub you want to go on swings and seesaws and slides and -” He paused. “Actually that sounds amazing. Yeah, okay.”

“Shall we take a picnic?”

“Uh, if by picnic you mean chocolate bars and flat lemonade -”

“Which I do.”

“-Then yes.”

In the dying light of the late summer sun, Sirius swung back and forth, lazy and lethargic, on the same swing that had been his since he was thirteen. He had a cigarette between his lips, a bottle of flat lemonade between his thighs and a half eaten chocolate bar melting away in the pocket of his jeans. He tipped his head back towards the sun, and let the remnants of warmth fall down upon his throat and neck. Bliss.

“Lily's going to Queens,” said James.

Sirius opened his eyes and looked over. James was clutching the metal ropes of the swing and looking out into the distance at nothing in particular. Although his mouth was closed he was clearly chewing at the inside of his own lip – a trademark he'd always possessed, which meant that he didn't want to talk about something but was struggling keep it inside.

“Mate,” Sirius sighed, “Are we really talking about this?”

James furrowed his eyebrows at him, but Sirius knew it was too blissful an evening for James to be seriously annoyed. Besides, he shrugged away his scowl only a few seconds later.

“You know, sometimes I think we really are perfect for each other,” he continued, and Sirius tipped his head back and closed his eyes again, “And she just can't see it. She'll be in London, and I'm gonna be in London -”

“And a million other people are gonna be in London...”

“-And we're gonna be in first year and we're not gonna be far apart and I mean, I'm going to

Kings , yeah? And she's going to Queens ! Kings and Queens! It's like – it's perfect, see? It's perfect!”

“Prongs, is it your time of the month again?”

James just laughed. He at least had the good decency to acknowledge his own raging femininity.

“Mm, maybe,” he said, “Or perhaps I'm not as blind as some people and I recognize the L-word when it's in front of me.”

Sirius opened his eyes just to blink.

“Lesbian?” he suggested.

“No!” said James, “Though, God, I wish. No. *Looooooooove* .”

“This is the girliest conversation we've ever had.”

“Oi. You've watched Dirty Dancing no fewer than thirty two times this summer alone . Don't you start with me Mrs Black.”

“Bloody brilliant film.”

“It is at that. Gimme your cigarette.”

Sirius did as he was told, sitting up and passing the roll up from his lips to James' hand. As James took a drag, Sirius rested his head against the metal chains and looked at him.

“What's that supposed to mean, anyway?” he asked.

“What, gimme your cigarette? It means – well, I don't think you have to worry Sirius, you've pretty much nailed it.”

“No, dickweed, I mean – like, me not seeing what's...” he gestured somewhat haphazardly, “Right in front of me.”

James looked at him with a slightly incredulous smile, and one eyebrow raised. He let a moment of silence pass as Sirius stared back expectantly. “You really have no idea?” he asked.

“Could not be more lost, mate.”

James laughed, looking away from Sirius to finish off the cigarette. “You'll figure it out,” he said, mystifyingly, “Come on, we'd better get back. It'll get cold and I know how you whine when you're cold.”

“I do not,” Sirius grumbled, but hopped off the swing nonetheless.

“Do you think we'll come back here?” he asked, as they vaulted over the fence and headed back in the direction of James' house.

“To the park?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, I expect so,” said James. He looked over at his friend, and Sirius could sense that some kind of horribly earnest moment was coming from the slightly awkward (but bravely sincere) look on James' face. “You're not gonna lose us, you know. No matter what you decide to do.”

“I never said I was,” Sirius insisted, defences immediately going up even though he knew they were totally ineffectual towards James.

James just looked at him, and after a moment Sirius sighed and rolled his eyes. He punched James in the arm.

“Thanks man,” he muttered, and James nodded.

It was a comfortable and familiar silence that settled between them, walking back home as the final strips of red and orange and yellow ribboned across the sky. The best thing about James was how often they could spend hours in each other's company not saying a word and it wouldn't be awkward, but then as soon as one of them said something noteworthy they'd be talking for hours and hours and hours. You'd think after seven years they'd have run out of stuff to talk about, but usually it felt like they'd barely even scratched the surface.

The second best thing about James was that he wasn't going anywhere. Once James Potter was in your life, he was there to stay. He wasn't the kind of guy you could lose, and although Sirius knew that on a level so innate and inherent it was almost part of him, it was still nice to hear James say it out loud.

These were all thoughts that Sirius felt he should probably voice, but Remus had always been better at this kind of sentimental thing than any of them.

“I wish Remus was here,” he mused aloud.

James laughed, looping an arm around Sirius' shoulders and tugging him in.

“Right in front of you, mate. *Right* in front of you.”

Chapter 14

The theory was, Albie Dumbledore was magical.

Of course, this wasn't so much *the* theory as much it was just Sirius' theory, but he couldn't think of any other logical explanation for it (and would pointedly ignore Remus' protests that “magic doesn't constitute a logical explanation, Sirius”). How else did everybody seem to know when he was coming?!

It wasn't written on any calendars, it was never announced by any one, and there wasn't any secret online forum to decide the dates of his arrival (as extensive googling had revealed). One morning you just woke up, and you knew. That morning – their penultimate day of work at the Castle – Sirius arose from his fort bed and looked over at James, squirreled away inside his own fort blankets, and they nodded.

“He's on his way,” said James, and Sirius grinned.

Oh, these were the best days of the year.

“Morning sunshine,” beamed Sirius, as Remus clambered in to the passenger seat of the rusty old citroen saxo.

“Hello Remus,” said Peter, followed by a “Sup, Moony?” from James.

“Don't 'sunshine' me,” said Remus groggily, folding his arms and pulling his knees up to his chest as if trying to become as small as possible. It was his trademark move for when he just wanted to have a harmless little Remus day of reading and chocolate and organizing things alphabetically, but was being forced to do fun things instead.

“Aw, what's the dealio, sunbeam?” Sirius said, leaning in from the back to grab Remus' shoulders in the passenger seat.

Remus batted him away half heartedly. “Nothing,” he said.

“Bloody right!” Sirius declared, “For it is the Most Glorious of Days!”

“Why? What's happening today?” asked Peter.

Sirius scowled. Peter was the only one of them who had never been able to pick up on Albie's imminent arrival – Sirius suspected it was something to do with a slightly smaller IQ, but James always punched him when he started to say it.

“Honestly Wormtail,” he sighed, “Did you not get the tingles?”

“What tingles?” asked Peter, “What tingles?!”

“You know,” said James, revelling in the joy of winding Peter up that Sirius knew James secretly enjoyed, “*The tingles*.”

“They know Albus Dumbledore's coming today,” explained Remus patiently.

Both Sirius and James pouted.

“Moony, if you're going to ruin our fun, at least have the decency to use His Majesty's proper name,” Sirius said.

“I don't think Albie is his *proper* name.”

“It may not be his actual boring name, but it is his *spiritual* name!” James argued, “Anyway I know he loves it, I overheard him singing that Flight of the Conchords song once. You know, the one about the dragon?”

“In a marmalade forest...” Sirius began.

“Between the make believe trees!” sang James.

“No no no!” Remus yelled, putting his hands over his ears, “No, please. Once that's in my head I'll never get it out. Once it's in it never leaves.”

“That's what she said!”

“Hahahahaha!”

Sirius saw Remus rolling his eyes as he and James cackled hysterically in the back seat. Peter blinked at Remus.

“I'll explain it to you later,” he said, “Be quiet children, we're here.”

Sirius and James did as they were told – after all, being here meant that they would be seeing their Lord and Master very, very soon.

Sure enough, as soon as they were out of the car they caught sight of McGonagall. She looked slightly more relaxed than usual, as she always did when Albie was around, and Sirius bounced up and down excitedly. Rumour had once circulated that there was something going on between she and Albie, since she was always so much more pleasant in his presence, but then the well established fact that Albie was quite clearly a raging homosexual had snuffed that flame before it had any real chance to burn.

“Boys, staff meeting this morning!” she called in their direction, heading off inside the Castle.

James gave a full body shiver. “The tingles are making me so – tingly!”

“Me too!” agreed Sirius, feeling like he was itchy inside of his skin. Even Remus looked a little squirmy – though he maintained that this was all madness. Peter just looked lost.

All though most staff meetings were held in a boring little clinical room outside of the tourist parts of the Castle, Dumbledore always insisted on holding his in the Great Hall. It was there that they headed to, Sirius and James bounding around with each other and Remus explaining what 'once it's in it never leaves' meant, slowly and patiently, to Peter.

They resumed their usual seats at the back of the Hall – no matter how much they adored someone, Sirius and James would never become the sort of losers that sat at the front; they were born for the back seats – and awaited Dumbledore's arrival. These meetings were always interesting because it was quite easy in an establishment as big as this to get caught up in your own job, and unless you made the effort you might never even see your workmates. Dirk Cresswell waved at them and they waved back, and Andromeda rolled her eyes at Sirius when she caught sight of his excitement.

Something that had totally slipped Sirius' mind in the bubble of excitement was that, of course, Lily would be here too. It was only when Remus – who was sitting on the other side of James - caught Sirius' eye and started flailing about manically, trying to gesture to the door without making James look at it, that he remembered.

“Fuck!” he hissed, but it was too late.

Again demonstrating that creepy ability to sense Lily as soon as she entered a room, James' eyes were on her the second she walked through the door. Sirius looked on as though he were witnessing a car crash - hating it, but unable to look away. It was the first time James had seen her since he had loudly and explicitly given up, and he'd been doing a pretty good job of handling it like a man until this point. Her eyes met his, and his eyes met hers, and it was like all the life went out of him.

“Prongs...” Remus said, because there wasn't anything else to say. He put his hand on James' shoulder.

Sirius took his eyes from James for a second and they landed on Remus, who just looked so sad and so sorry for James that, for whatever reason, it made James' plight completely disappear from his mind. He got that feeling again - not the tingles, but that thing around rib-level that sort of, *pulled*. Remus glanced up at him and held his gaze, and for there was a split second where Sirius just wanted, inexplicably, terrifyingly, bewilderingly, to *kiss him*.

Shit. *Shit*.

Then James made a little whimpering noise similar to that of a dying cat, and Sirius promptly got his priorities got back in order.

“You don't need her, bro,” Sirius assured him, heart still beating slightly faster than usual. Remus, he noticed, was quite pointedly not looking at him. These things could wait.

Lily had stormed haughtily off when she'd caught James' eye, so clearly there was no change there. Sirius rested his head on James' shoulder. "I promise you don't."

"Just bring on the Dumbles," said James bravely, "That'll make me feel better."

"That's the spirit, mate," said Remus softly, and Sirius could feel his heart in his throat.

And as if he knew, Albie Dumbledore walked up to the raised platform upon which he always liked to stand. A round of applause greeted his arrival, and with his bright red suit, twinkling eyes and long plaited beard he cast such an aura of benevolent charm and slightly insane loveliness that the whole room seemed warmer, somehow, and even James seemed a little more relaxed. Dumbledore's mere presence seemed to make everybody feel like everything was going to work out, and that nobody had to worry, and that everything would be fine; so it was necessary for Sirius as well as for James, because at least James hadn't been seized by the desire to kiss his best friend. God, but - it was fine. Everything would be fine. It was just – concern, that's all, for how sad he looked.

(Here an annoying little voice in the back of his brain reminded him that James had spent almost the entire summer sad, and at no point had Sirius wanted to kiss *him*. Punch him, yes, but never kiss. Jesus. God no. He shuddered at the thought, which unfortunately only made the voice point out that he had *never* shuddered at the thought of kissing Remus. Bloody voice. Stupid voice. Good-for-nothing trouble voice.)

"Ladies and genteladies!" Dumbledore began, "I'm sure you're all eager little bees to get off to the working day, but I gather you here this fine August morning for an announcement. As you all know the summer season comes to a close tomorrow – armour will be packed away, stables will be swept and princesses will come down from their towers."

Sirius glanced quickly at James, but he was staring steadfastly ahead.

"It is a sad day, yes, but we must use it to reflect upon all the fun we have had this summer, must we not? And what better way to do that, I ask you, than with the grand old tradition of a party!"

There, at least, was a distracting thought - and with all thoughts of Remus-kissing temporarily banished to a dark and secret corner in the back of his brain, Sirius grinned. Oh, he had been so hoping that that was what the tingles were telling him! James looked over at him and smiled, and though it seemed understandably a little bit forced, at least it signalled that there was a real opportunity for fun lurking amongst the gloom.

"So I invite you all to the The Hog's Head tomorrow evening, to join me in a night of responsible drinking and irresponsible dancing. Let there be laughter, let there be love, and most of all, let there be karaoke! I expect none of this fashionably late business you children are all so fond of – it begins at eight, and I shall see you at eight. A thousand glittering apologies for taking up so much of your time. Now, off to work! Chop chop!"

James and Sirius applauded heartily, but Peter and Remus shared the same, long-suffering look.

“Did he just say karaoke?” asked Peter, and Sirius turned with a wicked, mischievous grin.

“Yes, Peter,” he said, “Yes he did.”

The thing about significant periods of your life ending is that they never feel like quite as significant as you think they should. Sirius was a little bit idealistic and had a tendency to get too caught up in notions of how he expected things to be, and always got a little bit unnerved when they didn't play out as like he'd imagined. It wasn't a perfectionist thing or a control freak thing by any means, it was more of a childlike trait. He expected things to feel a certain way, and when they didn't, it left him slightly at a loss. Of course, just like he'd been reminding himself at the start of this final week, he knew that when he looked back on this it would feel like a big deal then. It was like a skyscraper; the further away you got, the more impressive it became.

He had to remind himself of this frequently as the last day of work came and went in a totally unremarkable, totally average, totally any-other-day-of-the-week way. They drove in Peter's car as they always did, they performed for the crowds as they always did, and at the end of the day they filled in their time sheets and went back to the car park, as they always did. It wasn't really a let down, and he wasn't really disappointed, as such. He'd just expected it to feel... bigger.

The thing was, the other three were all eager to quit work and go off to uni and start their lives as grown-ups, and for Sirius that didn't apply. It wasn't as if his friends were always going on about halls and student loans in the way some people were, but it was definitely there. It was a tangible undercurrent beneath their daily routine; they were leaving, and he wasn't. It was weird. Just... Weird.

Fortunately the weather at least recognized Sirius' need for poignancy. It had been an absolutely gorgeous week, this final week of August, with warm days and warmer nights and clear, starry skies. The sunset that painted the evening sky was almost identical to the one that had occurred in his outing to the park with James earlier that week; soft and stunning and making everything more golden and more lovely. As these words ran through his head Sirius did the obligatory thing of pulling a face, but then remembered that nobody could hear his thoughts (thank god for that) and that he could permit himself to be totally girly and ridiculous inside his head, if only for a moment.

Other things, however, were not permitted to happen inside his head. Under no circumstances was “kissing Remus” to enter his head. Neither was “getting Remus' kit off”. Neither was “running fingers in totally manly fashion through Remus' totally ungirly hair”.

Unfortunately, they were the only things that did want to happen in his head.

“Sirius!” Remus called, and Sirius nearly fell down.

“Hello?” he said, spinning round, “Yes, what? Hello? Hello?”

Remus blinked, coming to a stop beside him and James. James also looked at Sirius like he'd sprouted another head, but then seemed to decide that Sirius' bursts of momentary insanity were by this stage old news and went off to find Peter.

“Uh, hello,” said Remus, “Listen, I won't be able to come to yours and James' for pre-drinks.”

“Why not?” Sirius whined, internally unsure whether to feel relieved or disappointed, “Best part of going out is the bit before you go out!”

“Well, aside from the total insanity of that concept,” Remus began, “And the fact that I don't really understand the function of drinking before you go out drinking -”

“Uni will be wasted on you.”

“-I have to go to Matthew's for a bit.”

“Oh,” said Sirius, deciding on disappointed, “Oh, right. Um. Everything okay?”

“Oh, yes!” Remus replied, a little bit too quickly, “Yes, everything's fine. Just, you know. Being a boyfriend! Doing boyfriend things!”

“Well, hooray! Bloody right too!”

“Yes! Yes. Well, okay. So, I'll just, meet you guys there?”

“Swell. Are you not coming home with us?”

“No, Matthew's place is in the other direction so I'm just gonna get a bus.”

“Oh... Well I expect if you asked Pete he'd take you anyway? I could punch him, if you want?”

“Sirius, don't punch him.”

“Fun sponge.”

Remus laughed, and it caused something that felt like a happy little bubble appear in Sirius' belly. Oh, this was weird . But. Nice. He smiled.

“Okay,” he said, a bit softer than usual, “See you there. Have – have fun.”

Remus waved, already starting to walk off. “Bye!” he said, and Sirius watched him walk away a little bit longer than he should have.

The drive back from the Castle was quiet without being sad; full of the knowledge that this

was the last time they'd take this trip, at least for a while, but without actually acknowledging it. Sirius put his legs over James' lap and watched the Castle become smaller and smaller in the distance until Lily's tower had totally disappeared. They cranked up the radio, James treated them all to a compelling rendition of 'Poker Face' and Peter asked them all for the millionth time that week whether or not he should be doing geography at university.

“Yes, Pete!” said James.

“Of course you should!” added Sirius, “You *love* colouring.”

“And,” James began, before Peter had a chance to complain, “It was our beloved Queen who told you to do it, remember? So I'm pretty sure you could be hanged for treason if you back out.”

“Mm,” agreed Sirius, “And we'd have to come and rescue you and it would be so outrageously brave and impressive that all the poor girls would die from lust. And you wouldn't want that on your conscience.”

Peter looked concerned.

“No,” he decided, “No I wouldn't.”

“Then there you go.”

A few minutes later they pulled up outside the Potter/Black household, parked the car and got out. Peter had wanted to be the designated driver tonight until Sirius and James had verbally beaten that preposterous notion out of him, so now they'd be getting a taxi later on. The living room now was currently designed to look like Mordor (a tribute to James and Sirius' all time favourite films, of course). Matching piles of precarious pizza boxes formed the two towers, and an impressive amount of pillows constituted Mount Doom. Cracking open a beer Peter promptly sat on Mount Doom, but Sirius and James just looked at each other and sighed. Sometimes there was just no point.

“Where's Moony?” Peter asked.

James shrugged, chucking a beer at Sirius and taking one for himself.

“Off at his boyyyfrieends,” Sirius said, adopting as mocking a voice as possible on the final word. He draped himself over the sofa, sprawled all over it like a lazy octopus.

“Get – off – me -” James grumbled, pushing away one of Sirius' many limbs. He always felt like he had a few limbs too many. A birth defect perhaps; overabundant limbage.

“Uh oh,” said Peter, opening up a tube of Pringles.

“Why uh oh?” Sirius asked.

Peter shrugged. “I don't know,” he said, “Is it not an uh oh thing?”

“Stop being so mysterious, Wormtail!” said James, “Spit it out! No – *fuck*, god, no, not the pringles. Give *me* the pringles – no, Jesus, not the one you just spat out! What is *wrong* with you man? Give *me* the pringles, *in* the tube, since you *clearly* can't be trusted, and tell us what you meant by uh-oh!”

Sirius laughed and laughed and laughed.

“Just that – Remus hasn't mentioned him much lately!” Peter explained, looking flustered, “And when he does mention him he doesn't look that excited. So I just wondered if maybe something was the matter. If maybe it was an uh oh.”

Another bewilderingly insightful observation from Peter. Sirius stopped laughing, and looked over at James. “Is it an uh oh, d'you reckon?” he asked.

James shrugged. “Dunno,” he said, “Moony wouldn't tell us if it was.”

Very true. He wouldn't.

“An enigma wrapped up in a mystery, that man,” mused Sirius, “Well, I guess we'll find out tonight. Chuck us the pringles, Prongs?”

Chapter 15

“DOWN IT, DOWN IT, DOWN IT!”

Sirius led the chant, Peter joined in and then so did Frank Longbottom, and then Dirk Cresswell was singing along also, and then all of a sudden the whole pub was cheering for James to down his first dirty pint of the evening. Even Dumbledore himself was stood at the back cheering along, conducting them all merrily and looking a happy combination of delighted and confused. McGonagall had not joined in, but Sirius could sense she wanted to, the cheeky old vixen – there was definitely smile lurking somewhere around that mouth. Lily Evans was nowhere to be seen.

Triumphant, James slammed his glass back down on the bar and raised his fists in victory, taking a moment to bathe in the rapturous applause.

The pub was packed with workers, friends and families. Music was playing, alcohol was flowing and several people seemed to be deciding whether or not it was too soon to start making out against the wall, in full view of everyone. As far as Sirius was concerned it was *never* too soon for that.

Feeling appropriately merry by this stage, Sirius was bounding around and hugging everybody and declaring that every single person he bumped into was his *best friend ever*. He was just explaining to Sturgis Podmore that he'd never had a friend quite as loyal as him, when James came bouncing over (he certainly was a rather bouncy fellow) and launched himself onto Sirius' back. He staggered, but managed to remain upright.

“But who's your *real* best friend, eh buddy? *Eh?*” James asked, clinging on like a baby monkey as Sirius flailed around.

“Not you!” he insisted, “Not you, never you, *awful* you! Get off! You are so – how are you so heavy for somebody so hideously lanky?!”

“It's all muscle, mate,” explained James, slipping down off of a very relieved Sirius' back, “I'd train you but I don't think you're ready. Oi, stop texting! I am talking to you!!”

were r u? it's fun here. Would be more fu nwith u!!!

Sirius Black to Remus Lupin, 9.22p.m.

“I'm not texting!” Sirius lied, shoving his phone back into his pocket.

“Liar,” James said, but let it pass. He jumped about in front of Sirius, grinning, and his eyes were so bright and happy and excited compared to how he'd looked the previous morning that it was infectious, and it spread through Sirius like warm honey. “Anyway! Who's your *best* friend! Really! Really truly!!”

“You are!” exclaimed Sirius, and he grabbed hold of James and put his head underneath his elbow and starting rubbing his fist against his hair. “Yes you are, yes you are!”

They struggled about for a bit, wrestling and laughing and shoving at each other until Sirius thought he felt his phone go off in his pocket and let him go. When he took it out, however, the screen was still disappointingly blank.

“Oh, stop worrying,” said James, fixing his hair in the reflection on a pint glass, “He’ll be here in a minute.”

“He’ll – what? I’m not – who, what?”

But James had already become distracted. He’d caught sight of the karaoke machine in the corner – they were finally switching it on – and was, therefore, a lost cause. James Potter loved three things in life: Lily Evans, Newcastle United, and karaoke. Before Sirius could even blink James was crouched over the song list, pen between his teeth, brow furrowed in thoughtful consideration.

Prongs has discOVERED the karate. Come quick!!!!

Sirius Black to Remus Lupin, 9.29p.m.

Meant karaoke, soz, predictive text and I have chubby thumbs

Sirius Black to Remus Lupin, 9.30p.m.

Seriously, where are u?????

Sirius Black to Remus Lupin, 9.31p.m.

Do u think my thumbss are two big?

Sirius Black to Remus Lupin, 9.31p.m.

Drunken texting meant that he wasn't totally sure what he was writing, but one thing he was unequivocally sure of in this moment was that drunken texting was *definitely* a good idea.

“Hello, Sirius,” said Albie Dumbledore, materializing beside Sirius.

“Ahh!” he yelped, jumping back. The old man cut quite a, ah, *suprising* figure in his navy blue velvet suit emblazoned with painstakingly stitched gold stars. He had plaited his beard and stuck a number of feathers in, which Sirius appreciated. Maybe one day he would try that look out – though wasn't entirely sure he'd be able to carry it off with quite the same level of swag as the Earl of Warwick.

“Hello!” Albie repeated.

“Ah, hello, sir,” Sirius said, tucking his phone back into his pocket and grinning sheepishly, “Are you, uh, enjoying the party?”

“Oh, quite,” said Albie, “It is difficult not to enjoy things that are so loudly and enthusiastically enjoyed by others. I'm quite looking forward to young Potter's renditions

later on this evening!”

He raised his voice slightly at this, just loud enough for James to hear. He looked up, and grinned.

“I won't disappoint!” he promised, and Albie smiled and nodded in his direction.

“He never does, does he?” Albie said, looking back at Sirius.

Albie Dumbledore, though clearly an absolutely batshit insane individual, exuded an air of natural authority that was both vaguely intimidating and faintly reminiscent of a lion at rest. They'd have to start calling him Aslan Dumbledore. Ha ha ha ha ha ha. Sirius made a mental note to tell James that later.

Dumbledore was the only adult that Sirius had ever met who he felt a desire to impress – like he'd be really, really annoyed with himself if Dumbledore were disappointed in him.

“Not really,” Sirius said, because it was true, now that he thought about it. James Potter was not the sort of person to disappoint you.

“It would be nice if Miss Evans could see that,” Albie mused, looking over to where she stood – pretty and friendly in a bright blue dress, chatting away merrily to strangers in the corner.

Sirius blinked.

“Uh,” he said, “How do you know about...? That?”

“Oh, I know everything, Sirius,” he replied, looking back at Sirius with a warm smile. There was a pause. “And where is Remus tonight?”

“Oh, he'll be there,” Sirius replied, “He's just off at his boyfriend's tonight.”

Albie just looked at Sirius quietly, eyes twinkling away like gossiping stars. Sirius felt a bit uncomfortable under his gaze – as if Albie were laughing at a joke Sirius wasn't in on, though it didn't seem like the older man was being unkind. It was the same look that James and occasionally Remus kept giving them and it was starting to get, well, a bit annoying.

“Why do people keep looking at me like that?” Sirius demanded. It was a combination of alcohol and atmosphere that was making him feel like this; that was giving him the nerve to speak to his Ultimate Idol in such a way. “Like – like there's something that I don't know.”

“Do they?” asked Albie, raising an eyebrow, “I had no idea, Sirius, that must be frustrating for you.”

Sirius nodded. His bottom lip stuck out a bit, unconsciously. Dumbledore brought out the helpless child in all.

“Sit with me,” he said, sitting down on one of the comfy purple chairs encased in a shadowy corner of the pub and gesturing for Sirius to follow suit. Sirius sat. “When I was a young man, I knew a fellow named Grindelwald...”

“OI, BLACK!” yelled James over the boisterous din of the crowd.

“Sorry about that,” Sirius waved a lazy, non-committal hand in James' direction. James looked indignant. “Sorry about that,” he muttered, “What were you going to say?”

He was leaning eagerly towards Albie, feeling as if he was only seconds away from being allowed entry into this secret world of Things Everybody Knew Except Him. Even Peter had been looking at him a bit funny recently, though Sirius suspected he might have just had an itch on the inside of his nose. For some reason, knowing that he was about to learn why everybody kept looking at him like that felt linked to figuring out why he had wanted to kiss Remus the other night. It made him nervous.

“BLACK, GET YOUR VILE BUTTOCKS OVER HERE!”

Sirius cringed on James' behalf, but Albie just smiled. “We shall resume this later, young man,” he said, standing up and clapping his hand on Sirius' shoulder, “Now duty calls – yours and mine! Gilderoy! Gilderoy, fetch me my cane, I fancy a stroll!”

A young blonde man known as Gilderoy Lockhart had been Albie's assistant as long as Sirius had worked at the Castle, and he seemed to do little other than plait Albie's beard, cook him bacon sandwiches at odd hours of the day and – apparently – fetch his cane.

“I don't have a cane,” Albie confided to Sirius, “I just like watching him panic.”

And then off he strolled, leaving Sirius feeling a little bit bereft. He was seized by the urge to text Remus again, and all the alcohol in his brain told him that this was a Very Good Idea, but unfortunately the insistent yelping of James Potter dragged him away.

“SIRIUS, LOOK! THEY'VE GOT TIME OF MY LIFE! YOUR FAVOURITE !!”

“WAAAY UP HIIIIIGH, OR DOWN LOWWWW, I'LL GO WHEEEEEEREVERRRR YOUU WILL GOOOOOOOOOOOO!!! RUN AWAY WITH MY HEAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAART...”

James Potter was currently in what Sirius believed was commonly referred to as A State Of Disarray. His hair was even more ruffled than usual, his fly was undone, there were a multitude of beer stains all over his shirt, and he was belting out The Calling with real vehemence. Sirius couldn't exactly judge though; four shots of tequila had occurred since his interrupted chat with Albie and now he was dancing all over the place – currently in front of James' stage.

“Sing it, bitch!” he yelled, breaking into the robot.

Through his haze of alcohol and merriment and seriously bad ass moves, he saw Lily in the corner watching James with a totally unreadable expression. It definitely wasn't hatred, though, so that was weird. As he watched, he saw Albie come over and tap her on the shoulder. She looked up at him and he leaned in to whisper something in her ear which made her laugh – that sly old dog, though Sirius fondly – then he beckoned for her to follow him off into the same corner of the pub in which he had sat with Sirius.

Odd.

It was probably nothing. Sirius decided to forget about it, and promptly did so.

“IF I COULD TUUUUUUUURN BAACK TIIIIIME, I'D GO WHEREVER YOU WOULD GO – IF I COULD MAAAAAAAKEEEE YOOUUUUU MIIIIIIIIIIINEEE, I'D GO WHEREVER YOU WILL GOOOOOOOO!!!!!! HEY! HEY! MOONY! MOONY AND WORMTAIL!! HEY GUYS, THOSE ARE MY BUDDIES! LOOK AT THEM!”

“James, no, stop, you've got the words wrong!” Sirius called, jumping up and down and waving his arms in the direction of an oblivious James.

“What a friend we have in Prongs, eh Sirius?” said Remus' voice behind him.

Sirius yelped and stumbled, managing only to recover by grabbing a hold of Remus' shoulders to steady himself. He blinked at Remus, making out the familiar shapes of his jawline and his soft brown hair and his bright green eyes until he figured out who it was, and grinned.

“Moonyyyy!” he said, pulling him into a bone-crushing hug, “Moony, you're here! And you smell so nice!”

“Do I?” Remus laughed, gently pushing Sirius off so that he could breathe again, “Uh, thanks.”

Now that Sirius properly looked at him – which required effort, he had to really concentrate – he noted how Remus looked slightly flustered, and that he was shaking a little bit, and that there was something not quite right about the look in his eyes. It sobered him, momentarily.

“Hey,” he said, quiet in spite of the noise around them, “Are you alright?”

“Yeah!” said Remus, “Yeah, yeah, fine! Just – well, broke up with Matthew, but you know, it's all good!”

Sirius swayed a little bit where he stood, and credited the weird lifting feeling to the alcohol sloshing around inside him. “You broke up with Matthew?” he repeated, and Remus nodded, not quite meeting his eye. “Wait – *you* broke up with Matthew? As in, *you* did the dumping?”

“Is that so hard to believe?” Remus asked, eyebrow raised.

“No!” said Sirius, “No! I was just making sure I didn't have to go and beat anybody up. And I

don't! *Marvellous!*”

He kind of wanted to beat Matthew up anyway – kind of had ever since he'd met him, really – but since there was no valid reason he would have to suppress that urge for now.

Remus laughed. “No, no beating anybody up,” he said. There was a pause in which Sirius got the strange impression that Remus was waiting for him to say something, but it only lasted long enough for Sirius to process that feeling, let alone come up with words.

“Where's Peter?” he blurted out, deciding that something was better than nothing.

Remus frowned, looking around. “I don't know,” he said, “I think he was going to congratulate James but – I don't know where he's gone.”

“WASN'T I MAGNIFICENT???” James yelled, seeming to materialize out of nowhere and burst right into the little Sirius/Remus world that they inevitably managed to create whenever it was just the two of them.

“STUPENDOUS!!!” Sirius declared.

“Stupid,” said Remus.

“INCREDIBLE!”

“Idiotic.”

“B-E-A-UUUTIFUL!!!”

“Bewildering.”

“And that -” James interrupted, putting his finger firmly in the center of Remus' chest, “Is why Sirius will one day be my best man, and not you, silly little Voice of Reason Moony.” He pressed a wet, sloppy kiss to Remus' cheek, and both Remus and Sirius looked equally disgusted. “You've no faith in me! None at all!”

He turned to Sirius looking blissful and adoring. Sirius immediately tensed. “Unlike *you*,” James said, “You with your unfaltering belief in my adorable silliness! Hey – where's Peter?”

Sirius – thankful for the distraction and the fact that he didn't have to put up with James slobbering all over his face – shrugged. “No idea!” he said, then promptly decided that - “Who cares! SHOTS!”

“SHOTS!” James bellowed.

“Nooooo,” Remus whined, “Nooooo!”

“Ohhh yes, Moony,” Sirius said, grinning, “Are you honestly drinking red wine? Oh that's so cute. Oh you're such a little hipster.”

Predictably all of Remus' protests were in vain, for all of a sudden James had acquired three sambuca shots.

“Such tiny little glasses,” said Remus miserably, “Such menacing poison within.”

“One – two – three!”

As James called three they instantly chucked back the alcohol, and did the obligatory retching and face-pulling afterwards.

“Horrendous! I love it!” Sirius declared, then swung his arm around James' shoulders, “Hey, hey, hey, do you think they have Don't Stop Me Now???”

“Well, *duh*,” James replied, “Only the greatest karaoke classic of all time!”

“I'm gonna go and find Peter,” Remus said, rolling his eyes at his friends with the fond exasperation of somebody who knew better than to try and stop them.

“DON'T STOP ME NOWWWW!” Sirius began, impromptu, until James clapped a hand over his mouth.

“NO!” he yelled, looking furious, “Save it! Save it for the stage, Sirius, where it *belongs*.”

Sirius felt suddenly very ashamed of himself, and nodded firmly. “Yes, yes, I'm ever so sorry,” he mumbled, “Yes, you're absolutely right, of course. Hey – where did Remus go?”

“Off to find Peter I think,” said James, only half paying attention to Sirius and instead looking around the pub for where the karaoke sign up sheet had gone, “Have you told him you're in love with him yet?”

For the second time in the space of fifteen minutes, Sirius stumbled.

“What?” he asked, and he inexplicably felt hot and uncomfortable, and like his heart was trying to burst right out of his chest. “Have I – what?”

“FOUND IT!” James yelled, and ran off leaving Sirius alone.

He felt the sambuca rising in the back of his throat.

Oh, *fuck*.

Chapter 16

Vomiting was, in perhaps the understatement of the century, not fun.

Vomiting from an over indulgence of spirits was even less fun. Vomiting because your best friend thinks that you're in love your other best friend and you don't know how you feel about this was even less fun.

Then, add into that the fact that he was vomiting outside a pub and it wasn't even eleven yet, and Sirius felt fairly confident in deciding that this was the least fun thing he had ever done.

A few final dry heaves yielded nothing, so – feeling momentarily safe – Sirius leant against the outside of the pub. He pressed his forehead against the wall. Ah, cool, cool, benevolent brick.

“Are you having a crisis, Sirius?”

Sirius opened his eyes and looked sideways. There was Peter, looking a little bit timid – which was normal – and quite a lot sympathetic – which wasn't.

“You don't look very well,” he added.

Sirius heaved a great sigh and turned around, pressing his back instead of his front up against the wall. “No, no I'm well at all, Pete,” he admitted, “Not. Well. At all.”

He closed his eyes and took in a few deep breaths of the cool night air (trying to ignore the smell of his own vomit a few feet away). He felt... Weird. Peter leant up against the wall next to him, and his presence felt comforting and somehow necessary.

That was the thing about Peter. On paper it didn't make any sense that he could have become friends with James and Peter (the two biggest badasses the world had ever seen) and Remus (who did not suffer fools lightly), but he had. He brought something quite integral and quite necessary to the group – something quiet and small and barely-there, but supremely important all the same. He was a constant and reassuring reminder of their friendship; something that tied them all together, and Sirius thought that maybe it was about time somebody told him that.

It certainly wasn't going to be him though. He had bigger fish to fry.

“I think Remus is looking for you,” he said instead.

“Oh,” said Peter, quietly, “Oh, right. Um. Well, better go find him then!”

Then, because apparently he wasn't feeling quite emotionally messed up enough as it was, guilt decided to join in the party. As Peter started to leave, the little tug of that annoying

emotion caused Sirius to open his eyes and reach out his arm to stop him from going.

“Hey,” he said, feeling slightly uncomfortable but also feeling like it was the Good Friend thing to do, “Why are you out here, anyway?”

“Oh – just, getting some air,” Peter said, with a shrug.

Sirius raised an eyebrow. He knew that was all it took to get Peter to come clean.

“Oh, fine. I just – I was just wondering if maybe geography is the right thing for me to do. Or if – or if uni is even the right place for me to go. I mean... I don't really make friends very easily.”

That uncomfortable feeling grew. Oh, God, he *hated* talking about this kind of stuff – especially with Peter - but he gritted his teeth anyway, and made a real effort to listen. It was hard.

“And you guys... I think you're all gonna forget about me,” Peter finished. He said the last part very quickly, and then shoved his hands in his pockets and looked at his feet, like he was trying to become as small as he possibly could.

Sirius looked at him, and let the silence settle for a moment.

“Nobody's gonna forget about you, Pete,” he said quietly, but with real certainty. “Genuinely. Couldn't even if I wanted to.”

Peter smiled sheepishly, and was even brave enough to meet Sirius' eyes for a second. “Um, thanks?” he ventured, but he was still smiling, and seemed a great deal more relaxed, “Can we go back inside now? I'm a bit uncomfortable.”

Sirius laughed. “Oh thank God,” he said, “Yes, me too. Yes, please. Lead the way.”

Peter nodded, still smiling, and led the way back inside. Up on the stage James and – of all people – Remus were flailing around, microphones in hand, belting out Wham like it was the last thing they'd ever do. Sirius and Peter stopped and stared, transfixed.

“COME ON BABY, LET'S NOT FIGHT,” sang Remus.

“LET'S GO DANCING, AND EVERYTHING WILL BE ALRIIIIIIGHTTTTT!” crooned James.

“Oh, fuck this,” said Sirius. He put his empty pint glass down on the table, grabbed hold of Peter and legged it towards the stage. Somewhere on the way he managed to seize a microphone, and as he jumped onto the stage in such a spectacularly bad ass fashion that he would spend the next few weeks trawling facebook to see if anybody had taken a picture of it, he raised the microphone to his mouth.

“WAKE ME UP! BEFORE YOU GO GO!” the three of them bellowed together, “DON'T

LEAVE ME HANGING ON LIKE A YO YO!”

Peter – always a little bit slower than the rest – stumbled up on the stage, laughing, and took a microphone, but then seemed hesitant about actually joining in. This hesitancy was only allowed to last a second, because as soon as he spotted him James grabbed hold of Peter and pulled him in. Albie was in the front row, cheering along merrily and dancing around with none other than Ice Queen McGonagall herself.

“WAKE ME UP, BEFORE YOU GO, CAUSE I DON'T WANNA MIIIISS IT WHEN YOU HIT THAT HIIIGHHHH..”

The four of them crowded together, and Sirius brought out some of his best moves – the robot, the teapot, and one that he had simply named 'The Destroyer'. James was bounding around the stage like he was having the time of his life, Peter looked mildly alarmed, and Remus just looked so incredibly happy and lovely that Sirius was struggling to keep his eyes off him. Whenever that man enjoyed himself like this, so completely and absolutely and without hesitation, he always looked so surprised at his own joy. Like he couldn't understand why people thought him worthy of being included; like he was maybe beginning to think that it was okay to be happy like this; like his friends were the greatest things that had ever happened to him.

So how could Sirius mess that up? How could he sleep easy at night if he started babbling on to Remus about 'feelings' – feelings which he wasn't even sure he had and which actually made him want to vomit more than anything else? How could he take the friendship that meant so much to Remus, and to himself, and to all of them, and ruin it? He couldn't. But he also couldn't deny the delicious pull of his heart towards Remus; the exquisite agony of his feet's desperation to get closer; the heave of want and need that dominated his stomach.

Oh, he was so *spectacularly* fucked.

“TAAAKEEE MEEEEEE DAAANCIINGGGGGGGG...
TOOOOONIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIGHT!!!!”

Turning the final line into a ballad all on its own, the four of them belted out the words with such vigorous joy that Sirius decided that – even if he was totally and absolutely fucked – it wasn't all bad. James dropped to his knees and stretched out his arms, hitting a ridiculously high note that even Sirius hadn't know he could achieve. As they finished, and all took a bow, nobody applauded louder than Albie – and if Remus noticed how sweaty Sirius' palm was when they clasped hands to bow, he at least didn't mention it.

As they stumbled down from the stage – Sirius in dire need of another drink – Albie put his hand on James' shoulder. Sirius stopped to listen.

“I think Miss Evans wants a word with you,” said Albie, and the effect on James was instantaneous. Like a deer caught in headlights, he went totally still.

“Oh, God, really?” he whimpered, “What have I done now?”

The Earl laughed. "I don't think you've done anything wrong," he said, "In fact, I think you might have done something quite fantastically right. She's waiting outside."

"For me?" James croaked, and Sirius shared the disbelief that he could hear in James' voice, "She's waiting outside... for me?"

"That is what I said," Albie confirmed, with a nod.

"Oh," said James, "Well. I'd better go then, hadn't I?"

"I wouldn't keep her waiting," he advised.

James swallowed hard and looked over at Sirius with total panic written on his features. Utterly useless, Sirius shrugged and flailed a little bit. God, he didn't know what to do about his own romantic crisis, so he certainly wasn't about to take on James' as well.

Looking slightly sick, James stared over at the door. "If I'm gone for more than ten minutes," he said, "Send a search party?"

Sirius nodded, and clapped James on the back. Then, off he went, potentially to his doom and destruction. Sirius felt a bit like he was sending his son off to war. Still, it almost served as a pleasant distraction from the heat of Remus' body beside him. Almost.

"Holy shit," said Remus, staring after them.

"Quite," said Sirius. He looked over at Remus, who looked back at him.

"Drink?" Peter asked, and Sirius and Remus looked away from each other.

"Drink," they said, at exactly the same time.

Although Sirius had promised to send a search party after James if he hadn't returned within ten minutes, it was forty minutes later by the time he remembered his promise. Forty minutes and two rum and cokes and three vodka shots and eight games of Penny Can with Remus and a great deal of not actually *looking* at Remus later, that he remembered.

"Shit!" he said, suddenly, and Remus choked on his beer.

"What?!" he managed to splutter, and Sirius pounded a fist against his back.

"James!" he said, and then Remus said, "Shit!" as well.

They both hopped down from their bar stools – or perhaps 'fell' would be a more accurate word – and began to elbow other people out of the way in their pursuit of the door. They passed Dumbledore, who was by now on the other side of tipsy and was singing Waterloo at the top of his lungs whilst McGonagall swayed from side to side beside him and Gilderoy

just looked upset.

“And Peter!” Remus said, mysteriously.

“What?” Sirius yelled, over the crowd as they were momentarily separated by Frank Longbottom making out with some stranger called Alice. He took a second to pat Frank on the back as they passed.

“Where's Peter gone?” Remus repeated, coming to a stop in the middle of the pub.

“I don't bloody know!” replied Sirius, impatiently, “More to the point, James has probably had his head chopped off outside and Lily is in all likelihood finger painting with his blood!”

Remus stared at him for a second. “Sometimes,” he began, “You are *so* frightening. Look – you go after James, I'll go find Peter. All right?”

“Okay,” said Sirius, “What's gonna work?”

“Team work!” said Remus, and they high fived before parting ways.

Sirius palm tingled. He chose to ignore it.

“James!” he yelled, turning back into the crowd and forcing his way through, “Jaaaames!”

He burst out of the doors and out into the cold midnight air. A breeze ruffled at his t-shirt and knocked some of the alcohol fuzz away from his brain, and he blinked a few times like a creature emerging into the world for the first time.

Looking around, all he initially saw was little hoards of people lighting up cigarettes and chatting away merrily. And then he saw it.

It.

Further away from the majority of people, two figures were crowded together against a wall. Through the dull light of a street lamp Sirius could just make out a mass of red hair, and familiar glasses perched on a familiar nose, and manly hands holding on to a totally unmanly waist. He swallowed.

James and Lily were kissing.

Kissing.

Like, with mouths. And – presumably – tongues, though it was too dark to see that (thank *God*).

And perhaps the worst thing of all was that they weren't fervently making out like drunken teenagers who would regret it in the morning – they were kissing like it was the best decision that either of them had ever made. Sirius could hear quiet giggles and whispered words, and

he watched Lily mould herself to James' shape like two pieces of a puzzle finally fitting together. James' hand in her hair wasn't pulling at it desperately, but stroking and twining and playing. Sirius wasn't the biggest Lily fan the world had ever seen – not because he didn't like her (in fact he thought she was kind of a bad ass) but because he was naturally quite protective of James – but even he had to admit that this felt... Right. It did. It just did.

It also felt very private. Staring to feel a little bit uncomfortable at witnessing something so clearly intimate, he pulled his eyes away and stepped back inside the pub. The warmth and noise of the pub enveloped him, and his mind immediately turned to Remus, and to how much he wanted to crowd him up against a wall and play with his hair and laugh quietly together in the darkness.

He did what all great men do in times of strife. He turned to Albus Dumbledore.

“Dumbledore!” he yelled, elbowing his way back through the crowd, “Dumbledore!”

“Yes, Sirius?” said Albie, appearing out of nowhere and scaring the shit out of Sirius as he so frequently did. It was alright – Sirius recovered fast.

“I need to talk to you!” he said, feeling slightly panicky and flustered and scared but also excited, “About Remus?”

“How are Lily and James getting on?” asked Albie serenely, swaying a little.

“Um,” Sirius began, faltering, “Uh – fine? Well – I mean, they're making out, so, totally fine! Wait – what did you say to her earlier?”

“The truth,” said Albie simply, and then elaborated when Sirius continued to just stare, “I told her that James did not push Severus into the water, and that he was actually the one who saved him. Just between you and I though, Sirius, I think she'd been looking for a reason to fall in love with him for a while now.”

That was a very weird sentence to hear, especially from Albie Dumbledore. Sirius paused, tried to process it then decided he'd just file it away and deal with it later.

“Great,” he said, “Well, great. Anyway! Can I – can I ask you about Remus?”

“I think it's about time,” he replied, “Come, sit down.”

Sirius suspected that Albie had Gilderoy pushing those comfy purple chairs around to wherever the Earl needed them, because they suddenly materialized.

He sat.

“What were you going to say earlier?” Sirius asked, “About – you know, Grindelwindel, or whatever? Because I *think* I'm starting to like, figure it out? I just want to, um... Check.”

“Most wise,” Albie declared, with a nod, “Well, I was going to say that when I was a much

younger fellow, I fell quite deeply in love with my best friend. And I spent a great deal of time pretending that I wasn't for the sake of preserving a friendship, and in the end spent such a long time doing so that I ruined our friendship."

Sirius really listened. He was beginning to think that he might possibly understand.

"Riiight," he said, slowly, "And you think – you think maybe that has something to do with me and Remus?"

"Remus and I, Sirius, Remus and I."

"Oh my god you sound just like him. Yes, sorry – you think maybe that has something to do with Remus and I?"

Albie looked at him, blue eyes sparkling behind half-moon glasses.

"I don't know, Sirius," he said, quietly, "What do you think?"

Sirius thought. He looked down at his hands, scuffed his shoes against the carpet, and thought. The copious amounts of alcohol he had consumed were making that a task of Herculean proportions – as if it wasn't difficult enough already – but somehow, through the haze, he thought.

And what he thought was this.

"Yes."

"Yes?" Albie repeated, eyebrow raised.

Sirius nodded. He wasn't totally sure, but he was mostly sure, and damn it, that would have to be enough. "Yes," he said, "Yes, I think that applies. I think. I mean – I'm not 100%! But the only thing I've ever been 100% about in my life is beef, so."

"I understand," said Albie, and then promptly passed out. On Sirius. As in, one minute he was functioning and chatting away merrily and the next he was unconscious, snoring loudly on Sirius' lap.

Sirius stared down at him, then sighed. "Your support," he began, stroking Dumbledore's grey beard fondly, "Means the world to me."

"Well, hello there," said Remus.

Sirius looked up to find his friend looking down at the spectacle with an expression that made it quite plain that pictures of this would be ending up on facebook. Sirius didn't mind.

"Moony!" he said, grinning, genuinely pleased to see him in light of his new decision, "Moony, hello, I'm glad you're here!"

Remus smiled, surprised.

“Oh, uh, thanks Sirius? Do you need a hand?”

“What? Oh! Yes!”

Together they manouvered the sleeping Earl of Warwick away from Sirius' lap and comfortably into his own seat. Just as they got him settled he woke up, and Sirius and Remus both yelped and jumped backwards.

“No, I don't want to ride the yellow elephant!” Albie yelled, looking around manically for a second until he spotted Remus and Sirius and then became once more the paradigm of calm, “Oh, hello boys. Are you getting along well?”

“What?” asked Remus.

“Yes!” said Sirius quickly, “Yes, perfectly fine!”

Peter – oh, thank God for Peter – chose that exact moment to start belting out Baby Got Back on the karaoke machine. This alarming spectacle served to distract all three of them from what had quickly become a weird and awkward conversation, as Peter bellowed and yelled in what he clearly hoped was an tuneful manner. Well, you know what they say about hope.

“Oh good, you found him,” Sirius said.

“He was up on the roof, having a bit of a geography crisis because I know more about volcanoes than he does.”

“Well that's ridiculous, you know more about everything than anyone.”

“Oh, shush. It's okay now though – I got him a bar chart and a pack of crayola, so I think he'll be fine.”

“Well I for one am very impressed,” said the voice of James Potter, appearing up behind them. He was grinning from ear to ear, and seemed unable to contain the bubbling happiness within him.

“What on Earth happened to you?” Remus asked, as Sirius fought the overwhelming urge to be happy for him.

“I'll tell you later,” James said, “At the moment I've got a tenner with Pete's name on it – d'you reckon we can get him to strip?”

“I reckon we can give it our best shot,” said Sirius.

As they walked off towards the stage, Sirius overheard McGonagall as she came up to stand beside Albie.

“Has he figured it out yet?” she asked.

“Not completely,” said Dumbledore, “But I think he's getting there.”

Sirius smiled. He didn't quite know where he was going but he got the impression that he was getting there too, and he also got the distinct impression that wherever 'it' was... Yeah. It was *definitely* some place good.

Chapter 17

Sticking a tenner in the waistband of one gyrating Peter Pettigrew was the last thing that Sirius remembered. He woke up the next morning with a headache the size of his ego, and the inside of his mouth tasted suspiciously like a cat's foot.

“*Sweet* baby Jesus,” he whimpered, then clutched at his own head as the agony of each word seared through him. No. There would be no talking today.

It dimly registered in his brain that he was not in the living room, where he had been accustomed to waking up for a good few months. He propped himself up on his elbows and gazed blearily at his surroundings. Coat rack. Post box. Umbrella. Ah. He was in the porch.

“Why am I in the porch?” he wondered aloud, and then clutched at his poor little head again at the prompt reminder of why he wasn't speaking.

As every second passed he felt slightly more like himself, and after roughly two minutes of lying on the floor whimpering and feeling very sorry for himself, he remembered to perform the obligatory body check. He patted himself down warily – shirt was still there, trousers were still there, socks were still there, at least one shoe was still there, eyebrows were still there, hair was still there, teeth were still there. He breathed a sigh of relief.

Lying on his back in the porch, staring up at the horrendous strip lighting that had clearly been designed to make him miserable, Sirius tried to remember details of the previous night. Putting the ten pound note in Peter's waistband was the last clear thing he remembered, but even before that it was all a bit hazy. In fact, leaving the house was the last un-hazy memory he had.

There had been karaoke. He remembered that. He had ran and jumped up on stage to sing Wham. That much was clear. There had been a vaguely sentimental conversation with Peter (Sirius shuddered at that particular memory – why hadn't he been allowed to forget it?). There had been shots. Oh, there had been *so many shots*. And there had been vomiting. Yes, ugh - he remembered that, and from the way his mouth felt it seemed like there may have even more vomiting from what he remembered. There had been kissing... He dimly remembered kissing. Had *he* been kissing someone? Had someone been kissing someone else? Racking his brains was requiring a gargantuan effort, so he desisted. Oh well. It would come back to him.

There had been Dumbledore. He remembered that. At one point Dumbledore had passed out on top of him but, before that... Before that there had been Talking. Important Talking. Capital-T Talking. But what the *hell* had they been saying? He got the distinct impression that whatever they had been *Talking* about was important and he should not have forgotten it.

But, he had. So. Whatever.

The siren call of bacon pulled him into a sitting position. He breathed deep, and then let out a lustful groan.

“Bacon,” he whispered reverently, and staggered gingerly to his feet. Every single part of him protested at this move, including his stomach and his brain, but it was worth it for that delicious smell that was wafting through the house. He followed it obediently. “Bacon... Bacon... Bacon...”

“Bacon,” said Remus.

The smell had led Sirius to the kitchen – though he probably would've followed it to the ends of the Earth – where Remus was stood by the oven, poking at bacon with a wooden spoon, and looking annoyingly normal.

"Bacon," Sirius breathed, collapsing onto the nearest chair. He blinked up at Remus. "For me?"

Remus smiled, getting a plate very quietly out of the kitchen cupboard. He knew Sirius well enough by now to know that near-silence had to be held until at least his second bacon sandwich. Sirius waited impatiently, wriggling around on his seat and making appreciative little sounds as Remus got two slices of bread and buttered them just how Sirius liked (thick, and right up to the edges). A few agonizing moments passed and there it was – a bacon sandwich: glorious; greasy; completely his own. Sirius gazed down, lost in euphoric awe. He almost felt himself welling up a bit.

Then he seized the sandwich and took a positively colossal bite. Almost immediately, his hangover began to abate. What was it about the magical combination of bread and butter and bacon that was so effective? This was clearly a power that scientists needed to harness.

Sirius groaned through his mouthful. “Oh, you,” he said, “Oh you beautiful, sexy thing.”

Remus laughed quietly, and busied himself with making the second round as Sirius rained down a shower of compliments upon his sandwich.

When finished – which took all of 48 seconds – he closed his eyes and rested his head on the wall behind him. He felt slightly more normal, but that only equated to feeling like the dead reborn, rather than death itself.

“Where are the others?” he asked, taking slow and measured lungfuls of bacon-scented air.

“James is vomiting his guts out upstairs,” said Remus, “And Pete's still asleep.”

“Where he'll remain for another four hours at least.”

“Exactly.”

Now that Sirius listened for it, he could hear the faint noises of retching upstairs. As soon as he registered it he tried his hardest to block it out – he'd never been the type to vomit the morning after (always got that out of the way the night before) but it was particularly tempting this morning.

Eventually he opened his eyes and watched Remus. His hair was messy, like it always was in the morning before he caught sight of a mirror and flattened it down, and Sirius had always

kind of preferred it that way. Small curls edged their way around Remus' ear and jaw line, and loose strands of light brown fell into his eyes as he moved. Dressed in just a thin white t-shirt and black pyjama pants that were presumably James' (Sirius did not own pyjama pants), all the lines and muscles of his body were visible. He had quite nice lines and muscles, actually. Now that Sirius was looking.

Huh. For some reason that reminded him a little bit of the conversation he'd had with Dumbledore. It had concerned Remus... It had definitely concerned Remus, he was sure of that now. Had it concerned lines and muscles? Had it concerned why Sirius was noticing lines and muscles?

Before he could dwell too long on trying to retrieve that memory, another one crashed into his brain like a freight train.

“Ahh!” he yelped, and Remus dropped his fork.

“What?!”

“James and Lily!” Sirius said, eyes wide, flailing, “James and Lily – they kissed! They kissed! Oh my God! Wait – do you know?”

He dimly remembered being the only one to witness it.

“Yeah,” Remus said. He sat down opposite Sirius, passing him a second bacon sandwich and then tucking into one of his own. “He told me when we got back. You had already passed out in the porch and Peter was researching volcanoes.”

“I should go and check if he's okay!”

“Oh I think Peter's fine now, he feels confident that he knows enough.”

“No – *Prongs*, you fool of a took.”

“Oh, yes. Right. I think he's fine.”

“Fine? How could he be *fine*?! He got off with Lily Evans – he's probably having a panic attack!”

Remus smiled. “I think he's all right,” he assured Sirius, “The way he talked about it... I think it was less of a 'getting off' thing and more of a 'starting a relationship' thing.”

Sirius sank back in his seat.

“D'you reckon?” he asked, feeling a bit sick.

Remus didn't answer straight away. He put down his bacon sandwich, and met Sirius' eyes. “Hey,” he said, softly, “You're happy for him. I know you are.”

Sirius paused for a second, and then nodded. Grudgingly he had to admit that yes, he actually sort of was.

"It's just so weird," he mumbled.

"At the moment it is," said Remus, "But one day it won't be. One day you won't be able to imagine James without her. Or her without him."

"How do you know?" Sirius asked.

Remus shrugged. "I've always been very wise, Sirius, we know that about me."

He smiled. They both did, and their gazes crashed into each other; Sirius' grey against Remus' brown. Something clenched in the pit of Sirius' belly, and he noticed the bump of Remus' throat rise and fall. Another memory returned to him; slowly, this time, but it made his heart beat faster.

"You broke up with Matthew," he said quietly, and although it was tempting he felt it was important not to break Remus' gaze.

"I did," Remus replied - just as quiet, and just as soft. He looked a little bit nervous, but also like he couldn't figure out why that might be. Sirius knew how he felt.

The air was thick and heavy between them, and a million potential sentences seemed to be floating in it. All Sirius had to do was pick one. He remembered Dumbledore's voice in his head from the previous night.

When I was a much younger man, I fell quite deeply in love with my best friend.

"Why?" Sirius asked, "Why did you break up with him?"

Remus sighed, still looking straight at Sirius. During one of their drunken heart-to-heart's a couple of years ago, James had told Sirius that when he looked into Lily's eyes he saw everything he wanted reflected back at him. Not just *her*, not just *Lily*, but the man that he himself wanted to be, and the life he wanted to lead, and the future he wanted to build.

It was such an outrageous cliché, but lost somewhere in the chocolate brown depths of Remus' eyes Sirius started to know what he had meant.

"Why do you think?" asked Remus.

Goosebumps rose up all over Sirius' skin in spite of the warmth of the room, and he saw them do the same to Remus. And then it came to him, as clear and bright as a summer sky: Sirius wanted to *kiss* him. Oh, *Jesus*, he wanted to kiss him. And - fuck it - he was going to. He wanted to, and he would, and he was going to, and with his heart beating at a million miles an hour he leant ever so slightly forward, ever so slightly closer, and -

"SIRIUS!"

Sirius jumped back, and Remus flinched. James' voice penetrated the space between them, shattering the silence and the moment. Sirius could feel his heart in his throat.

“I have to go,” he said quickly, knocking his chair backwards in his hurry to stand up, “Sorry, I – Sorry.”

Sirius fled, and felt Remus' eyes on his back as he ran.

“SIRIUUUUUSSSS!” James whined as Sirius cantered up the stairs, with his heart still hammering loudly in his ears.

“What?” he demanded, bursting through the door of the bathroom.

Oh, it was a pitiful sight. Almost enough to make Sirius forget about his cowardly abandonment of the man downstairs. James was knelt beside the toilet, clutching it lovingly and pressing his face against the cool, cool porcelain. He was a weird, greyish colour, and sweat (or potentially grease, but probably both) had caused his hair to stick to his forehead. Poor, *poor* bastard.

“Attend to me,” he moaned.

Pulling a face, Sirius sat down cross-legged next to him. He patted him awkwardly on the back, which only made James cough and retch a bit.

“Do you feel sufficiently attended to?” Sirius asked.

“Blegh,” was James' only response. Then, “Sorry mate. Did I wake you up?”

“No, I was in the kitchen,” replied Sirius, then faltered a bit before adding, “With Remus.”

Oh, he felt sick.

“Is he making bacon?” James asked.

Sirius nodded.

“What a guy.”

Sirius sat beside him in thoughtful silence, rubbing his hand in circles on James' back. Was this the male equivalent of holding someones hair back? His mind kept wandering back downstairs. To what had happened. To what had almost happened.

“Are you gonna call Lily today then?” he asked, mostly for something to distract himself.

“Why would I do that?” James asked, pulling a face, “I don't want my balls ripped off.”

Sirius frowned. “Uh – sorry?” he said, “Did something happen at the end of the night that I don't know about?”

“What the hell are you talking about, you mentalist? Don't ask me – I can't remembered anything past singing Wherever You Will Go.” He looked blearily up at Sirius. “Was I good,

Sirius? Was I very very good?"

"You were magnificent," Sirius assured him, "So... You really don't remember anything?"

"Not. A. Thing."

Sirius took a second to consider. He had a golden opportunity on his hands here to completely sabotage the entire Lily and James relationship, and he could have his friend back and they could be single and awesome and brilliant together, and would never have to worry about all the frightening implications of kissing or not kissing somebody. It would be brilliant.

But – Remus was right. Sirius *was* happy for him. A lot of his resentment at Lily for stealing his best friend away was just leftover from a very long time ago, when James had first become besotted. In all honesty he hadn't really felt that way for a while – not if he really took the time to think about. Loving Lily had made James a better person, and if he had an opportunity to be loved by her in return, then the sky was the limit, really.

And also, Lily was pretty cool. He supposed. Sort of. Maybe.

"You kissed her, mate," Sirius said, "And she kissed you back."

James went very still. Then, after a moment, he looked over at Sirius.

"Are you serious?" he asked.

Sirius nodded. "In name and in nature," he said, "Though it pains me to admit it. Albie told her that you didn't push Snivellus in and that you actually saved him – though fuck only knows how he knew that – and that apparently she'd been looking for a reason to fall in love with you for a while."

James looked like he was about to be sick. Again. He swallowed hard.

"Sirius..." he began, slowly, "If this is some kind of joke -"

"It's not," Sirius said.

James sat back on his knees, staring ahead of himself in total disbelief.

"Oh shit," he breathed.

"I know."

"Oh, *shit*."

"Yep."

"I forgot?! We kissed – she kissed me – she kissed me, oh, Jesus, and I *forgot*?!"

"Mate, you were plastered."

“Oh God, oh God, oh *God*,” muttered James, stumbling to his feet and looking about desperately, “I forgot! I forgot! This – this is insane! Oh God, I have to ring her! No! I have to go! I have to go and see her! It's the gentlemanly thing to do! Isn't it?! How did I leave it last night? Can you remember? Damn it Sirius, *how did I leave it?!*”

He seized a bewildered Sirius by the shoulder and shook him hard. Sirius whined and batted James away. “Ahh, fuck off, I don't bloody know! I can't remember much past Wake Me Up Before You Go Go!”

“We sang Wake Me Up Before You Go Go?” asked James, momentarily stopping his panic.

“Yeah.”

“Was it good?”

“It was awesome.”

“Oh, cool.” Then the panic resumed. “But I have to go! I have to go and find her! I should – I should shower! No, *no*, there's no time, Sirius, there's no time!! Do you know where Pete left his keys?”

Sirius' eyes lit up. “Are we stealing his car?”

“I just asked where he left his-”

“Are we stealing his car?!”

“Yes, Sirius, we're stealing his car!” James yelled, and Sirius applauded with glee, “Now where are his *god damn keys*?”

“I think they're in the fridge.”

“What? Why would they be in the fridge?”

“It's where we had them last.”

“What? Oh, fuck it, okay, let's go go go!”

They ran down the stairs with all the noise and excitement of a buffalo herd, and it was only when they reached the bottom step that Sirius realized that going into the kitchen meant *going into the kitchen*. He racked his brain hastily for a decent excuse not to go in but the poor hungover little thing yielded nothing, and James was still moving and god damn so it was he and then he was in the kitchen, looking at Remus who hadn't moved since Sirius had left him and who hadn't touched his bacon sandwich. Their noisy arrival seemed to knock him out of deep thoughts, and he blinked up at them. Sirius felt his heart tug.

“Are you off to win fair lady's hand?” Remus asked, calmly, looking at James and not Sirius.

Oh, that made him sad. That made him really sad.

“I’ll be back soon,” he said, quickly, and Remus looked over at him, “I’ll – I’ll be back soon.”

Adrenaline was pounding through his veins and he didn't really know why he'd said that, but he'd spent this entire summer thinking about why he'd said certain things to Remus and why he hadn't and why he'd wanted to do certain things to him, and by now he was just... He was *over it*. He was tired of it, and, fuck it, from now on he was going to roll with it. So when the urge seized him to kiss Remus again – and he felt fairly confident that it would – he was going to. And to hell with consequences.

But, right now, James needed him.

“Aha!” James yelled, locating the keys behind an old cucumber which he chucked to Remus.

“Moony, throw this out,” he said, “Black – with me!”

James was gone in a whirlwind of panic and mania, and Sirius mouthed 'soon' to Remus before turning and following – leaving him behind for the second time that morning.

Chapter 18

Sirius drove. James was the only one of them that actually had a license, but he was so panicky and unhinged at the moment that Sirius felt he was probably the safest driver of the two. Anyway, he understood the theory. Pretty much.

As James babbled – and oh, could he babble – Sirius' thoughts turned inevitably back to Remus. The heavy thrum of excitement and fear and bewilderment was still fizzing through him, turning his blood to lemonade and making his heart squeeze tight, but there was something else emerging in his depths. A sort of... Calm, really. A sort of acceptance. A sort of sub-conscious understanding that this had always been coming, somehow.

“Prongs,” he said, cutting his friend off mid-sentence, “I’ve a question to pose.”

Seeming grateful for the distraction from his own insanity, James relaxed into his seat and took a deep, calming breath. He looked at Sirius. “What’s up, man?”

“Do you know?” he asked.

“...Know what?”

“Why Remus broke up with Matthew? Do you know?”

James was quiet for a bit, but Sirius didn't look at him. He kept his eyes fixed firmly on the road ahead. This was a weird conversation to be having anyway, and he certainly wasn't going to make it even more girly by throwing eye contact into the mix.

“Course I do, mate,” James said, “Don't you?”

Sirius swallowed. “Yeah,” he said, “Yeah, I think I do.”

“And uh...” James began, awkwardly, “How does that... Make you... feel?”

Both of them cringed, but ploughed on bravely.

“Um, like, mostly good, I think?” ventured Sirius, “Well... Really good, actually. But – how do you know?”

James shrugged. “It's obvious, mate.”

“It is?”

“Well not to you, evidently, you're as dense as Aberdeen fog, but to pretty much everybody else with eyes.”

“Even Pete?”

“Even Pete. We've had bets on how long it would take you to figure this out since Year 11. Speaking of – you couldn't wait another few weeks, could you? I thought it'd take you till the night before we all leave.”

“Well that's cause you've always been a cliché,” said Sirius, turning the car down the road, “She lives down here, right?”

James started to look ill again. “Yeah,” he said, “Second house on the right.”

Sirius reached over and clapped him on the shoulders. “Deep breaths, man. Deep breaths.”

For no fewer than three minutes, they sat outside Lily Evans' quaint, suburban house in silence. When they did decide to speak, it was – typically – at exactly the same time.

“Are you just gonna -”

“What if she -”

Silence, again. Sirius looked over at James, whose hangover appeared to have returned with full force as he stared at the house. A light was on in the upstairs bedroom, framed with navy blue curtains and with a stack of boring looking books propped up against the window. James was gazing at it, looking slightly lost.

“Prongs?” said Sirius, awkwardly prodding James' upper arm, “It's time, man.”

James nodded quickly, and more than was necessary. “Okay,” he said, taking a deep breath, “Right. Yes. Okay. Here goes nothing.”

He opened up the car door, and Sirius followed suit. Immediately, James slammed his car door shut again.

“No!” said Sirius, “No, you were so close!”

James turned on him, his eyes fixed sternly upon Sirius' face. Sirius quivered.

“Absolutely not, Sirius,” he said, “You are not coming with. No way.”

“What?!” Sirius exclaimed, outraged, “Five bloody years I've put up with this shit and I don't even get to see how it ends?!”

“Mate, she will rip my balls off if she answers the door and *you* are there.”

Sirius scowled. “Which is the primary reason that she's not the bird for you anyway.”

James ignored this.

“Anyway,” he said, “You need to go back and talk to Remus.”

Sirius shifted awkwardly in his seat. “I know. You're – um – alright with it, then?”

He'd never really been concerned that James would have some kind of issue with his wanting to clamber all over Remus without clothes on – the idea of James Potter being prejudiced towards anyone was laughable – but it felt like the sort of thing he should say.

James sighed, and clapped his hand on Sirius' shoulder.

“Listen, mate,” he began, “You're my best friend. Which means that like, where you lead... I will follow, you know? Anywhere that you tell me to -”

“You're gonna follow me into Moony's bed?!”

“Ugh, no. Look, I'm trying to have a *moment* here. What I'm saying is, if you need me to be with you, I will follow.”

“Oh. Oh. Oh! You're quoting the Gilmore Girls soundtrack at me!”

James blinked. “Am I?” he said, then started laughing, “Oh, yes, so I am.”

“Where you leeeead! I will followww, any any wheeere, that you tell me too,” Sirius sang, and then James joined in, “If you need – you need me to beee with you I will followww, where you leeeead.”

Sirius felt overwhelmingly fond of his best friend in that moment, and knew that somewhere in the midst of James' total inability to separate real life from TV shows he was telling Sirius that no matter what happened, and no matter who he wanted to shag, he would not lose his best friend. He reached out to ruffle James' hair, and James only made a very half-hearted attempt to bat him away.

God, he was such a woman today.

“Go get 'em tiger,” he said.

“Don't ever say that again.”

“Knew it as soon as I said it.”

James opened the car door and, this time, miraculously, stepped out. Before heading up the long garden path to the front door he turned and leaned back inside the car for a moment.

“What are you doing man?” Sirius demanded, “Do I have to frog march you up there? Do I have to do the talking for you?” His eyes lit up. “Oh, *please* can I do the talking for you?”

“Don't be absurd,” said James, then looked at Sirius sternly.

“Carpe the diem, Black,” he said, “Carpe the motherfucking diem.”

Sirius looked at him.

“Carpe the diem,” he repeated, and then nodded. “Yep. I can do that.”

“Bloody right. And I can do this. Okay. Yep. Right. Let's go. Let's do one.”

James stood up and rubbed his hands together, looking at Lily's front door with equal measures of apprehension and adrenaline. “Please don't stick around to watch my absolute humiliation?”

Sirius snorted. “Don't be mental,” he said, “If I can't actually be next to you to witness it, I'm at least to going to watch creepily from afar. You cannot deprive me of that joy.”

Sensing a compromise, James sighed. He at least knew when to give up.

“Fine,” he said, “Wish me luck?”

“You don't need it,” Sirius assured him, but then said it anyway just to get rid of some of the greenish colour from James' face. “Good luck.”

James shut the car door and walked up the path – poor thing, Sirius could see him trembling from here. When he knocked on the door and she didn't immediately answer, Sirius actually became incredibly nervous on James' behalf. He gripped the steering wheel and willed her to answer; confident that she would, but still totally terrified that she wouldn't. For the first time in his life, he was rooting for this to happen.

“Come on...” he muttered under his breath, “Come on you little harpy, come on ...”

And then she answered the door, and Sirius could breathe again. She looked bleary eyed and sleepy, dressed in hideous pink pyjamas that clashed violently with her messy red hair. Last night's make up surrounded her eyes, her feet were encased in what could only be described as granny slippers, and Sirius would have bet good money that she hadn't brushed her teeth yet.

But James loved her. So Sirius loved her too.

Obviously he couldn't hear any of the words that were being exchanged, but he took it as a good sign that she didn't look instantly violent. In fact – it was quite the opposite. She smiled, leaning against the doorpost and looking at James with such bright eyes that even Sirius could see how it was endearing. And James miraculously didn't seem to be doing that bad – he wasn't flailing, he wasn't jumping around and he hadn't vomited or fallen over. He was smiling and talking with his hands tucked into his pockets so he wouldn't ruffle his hair, and from here Sirius recognized characteristic mannerisms of self-deprecating charm – an awkward shrug of the shoulders, a half bitten lip, a swallow at just right the moment.

Lily pointed to something in the distance with a raised eyebrow, and it took Sirius a second to figure out that it was him. For a brief second he considered leaping into the back seat and hiding (would she be furious?) but the time it took him to entertain this possibility rendered it null and void. So he settled for an awkward little wave instead.

She didn't seem to mind, laughing and shoving James in a manner that actually sort of... Playful. And, well... Flirty. God. Sirius wondered if he'd ever get used to this.

But in truth, he actually already was. Remus was right – all of a sudden, the strange thing was not imagining them together but imagining them apart. It felt right. It felt real. It did.

And, speaking of Remus, Sirius felt he had intruded long enough. Watching something that felt so incredibly *right* made him want to do what felt right, and to hell with whatever tiny little part of his brain that still insisted it was wrong.

Lily beckoned James into the house, and he followed, looking over his shoulder at Sirius for one last look. He smiled.

Sirius stuck his tongue out just to watch James laugh.

Then the front door closed, and he started up the car.

Time to carpe the motherfucking diem.

Chapter 19

As Sirius drove, James' words reverberated through his still hungover brain. The poor thing had had such abuse this summer, what with constant thinking and worrying (which were two very un-Sirius characteristics), so he resolved to spend at least the next two weeks doing neither - once he'd got this out of the way. Preferably, he'd be so busy exploring Remus' lower body with his tongue that he wouldn't have time to think at all.

But, anyway.

"We've had bets on how long it would take you to figure this out since Year 11."

Had he really been so totally blind? So utterly *dense*? If Remus had been 'into' Sirius (for want of a better word) since Year 11 then that was... That was *four bloody years*. That was only one year less than James had been pining over Lily...

But Sirius had always made it *painfully* obvious that he liked girls. He had slept with as many as he feasibly could and made out with even more, and he had done this all in the view of Remus – which, in light of recent information, made him feel a little sick. But Remus had never said, or done, *anything*. He had just always been there; Sirius' best friend, his constant, his little piece of quiet patience away from James, the grounding force that simultaneously anchored him to the ground and made him feel like he could fly. Remus knew him inside and out. He'd never questioned that before, never questioned what having that meant to him, but then this summer, seeing him with somebody else...

All the confusion, frustration, angst, worry, nerves, guilt and occasional throwing up of the summer gave way to something new. Excitement.

He had figured it out. He had *figured it out*, and Remus liked him too, and after all this time he was going to Do Something About It.

A stupid inane grin spread rapidly over his face, and he had to concentrate hard on the road to keep from crashing into lamp posts. He switched on the radio to give him something to concentrate on that wasn't images of Remus' smile or bitten lip or curls of hair around his ears, and the song blasted through the car's speakers...

*We laugh until we think we'll die
Barefoot on a summer night
Nothin' could be sweeter than with you*

*And in the streets we're running free
Like it's only you and me
Geez, you're something to see*

*Ahh, home
Let me go home*

Home is wherever I'm with you

Ahh, home

Let me come home

Home is wherever I'm with you

La la la la

Take me home

Darling I'm coming home

Well, obviously.

For the second time that morning, he sat parked outside a house which contained within it a person who could make or break a heart. It felt like a Big Deal. Hell, it *was* a Big Deal – which was so weird, because Sirius had spent so much of this summer wanting to things to feel like big deals and then they didn't, and then this Absolutely Huge Deal had come along totally unexpected.

With the music now switched off and the engine no longer running, some of the recklessness of only a few moments before ebbed away. What was he actually going to say? Rooting around in the glove box for a moments he uncovered a Steps CD, copious amounts of jelly beans (he ate three) and, eventually, a pen that worked.

Paper however continued to elude him, so he settled for the age old substitute – his own flesh. On the back of his hand he wrote a list of things to say.

- I have figured it out.
- I'm sorry for telling Matthew the best places to take you on a date because I clearly should've taken you instead.
- I'm sorry it took me so long to figure it out.
- I hope it isn't too late. Oh God I hope it isn't too late!!

He then thought about writing 'I love you', but his pen paused in mid-air. Did he? He felt fairly confident that he did... But also felt fairly sure that this was not the kind of thing you only said if you were fairly confident.

He left it out for now.

His phone bleeped in his pocket.

You shagging yet???

Sent from James Potter to Sirius Black, 10.11a.m.

No. Composin solid argument on back of hand. U?

Sent from Sirius Black to Jamer Potter, 10.12a.m.

Sounds legit. Don't overthink it though bro. And nope – she's COOKING for me though so

very much a similar level of awesome.
Sent from James Potter to Sirius Black, 10.12a.m.

Seriously though, man. This is fucking great.
Sent from James Potter to Sirius Black, 10.13a.m.

Vom.
Sent from Sirius Black to James Potter, 10.13a.m.

U jelly?!
Sent from James Potter to Sirius Black, 10.13a.m.

No. Clearly the ladies are no longer 4 me. Happy for u, tho it pains me deeply.
Sent from Sirius Black to James Potter, 10.14a.m.

LOL. Stop panicking. Get in there. Dude loves you, dude.
Sent from James Potter to Sirius Black, 10.14a.m.

Yeah?
Sent from Sirius Black to James Potter, 10.16a.m.

Yeah. Time to nut up or shut up.
Sent from James to Potter to Sirius Black, 10.16a.m.

So that, was exactly what he did.

Happy with his hand based argument and confident that it was sound, he stepped out of the car and locked it behind him. Suddenly, the house that he had lived in for the past two years looked so cold and imposing, and he realized why James had been visibly trembling as he'd walked up the path to Lily's front door.

It was like the Green Mile. Behind this particular front door everything was out of his hands. Sirius had had “girlfriends” before but he'd never really had anything serious – he'd certainly never been in love – and this was the first time he was putting himself out there without being 99% sure that he'd get at least a blowjob in return.

No. No. This was definitely not the time to be thinking about blowjobs.

Fortunately, unlike James, Sirius did not have to suffer the agony of ringing the doorbell and waiting for a response. He felt nervous all the same - heart pounding with adrenaline in his chest, sweat collecting over his body – as he walked through the unlocked front door and stepped over the shoes that he had apparently abandoned in quest for slumber the previous night.

The faint smell of bacon was still drifting through the house, and the sounds of quiet little rattles and footsteps and general movement indicated that Remus was still in the kitchen. He was a kitchen-y sort of a bloke, to be honest. Recipe books and measurements and cupboards specifically for chocolate. Sirius followed his nose, and simultaneously his heart.

The two had always been linked.

“Moony?” he said, after a brief second of Totally Uncreepy and In No Way Weird watching of Remus from the doorway.

Remus looked up and – god damn it – Sirius had to catch his breath. The other man opened his mouth to say something but Sirius held up a hand to stop him. It was the same hand on which was written his winning argument for them having lots of dirty filthy sex and also maybe getting feelings involved, but to his horror, the majority of it had sweated off.

"Hang on," he said, squinting at the inky blur.

It was perhaps not the best opening line, but it would have to do.

Finding himself only capable of discerning 'sex for bumblebees' amongst the blackness (where did that even come from?) he abandoned it as a lost cause. His hand had betrayed him – treacherous bastard – and his brain couldn't remember what he'd written anyway, so he was on his own. He took a deep breath.

“So,” he began.

A strong start, he commended himself. Well done.

“So?” Remus asked, raising an eyebrow and looking slightly amused. And cute. *So* cute.

“Earlier – when you asked why I thought you'd broken up with Matthew..”

“Yes?”

“Well.” Sirius swallowed. “I think I know.”

Remus looked at him, carefully. He had been sat down at the kitchen table, but now rose and took a few steps forwards, coming to stand closer to Sirius with his hands tucked into his those black pyjama pants that he clearly had no desire to change out of.

“Yeah?”

Sirius nodded. “Yeah.”

“I think you do too,” Remus said, “And although I'm sure you've got some wonderful speech prepared, I've been waiting for this for a long time, so if you don't mind terribly, I'm going to kiss you now.” A pause. “Does that sound all right?”

Sirius' throat went dry, and it took every ounce of self-restraint he had not to whimper.

“Yep,” he agreed, aiming for casual but ending up with high-pitched.

Remus didn't seem to mind. He closed the gap between them – and, oh, there was a metaphor

in there somewhere – and pressed their mouths together.

It was like *breathing*.

Here it was - the Big Deal he'd been looking for all summer. Here was the moment; the definitive moment that told him he was complete. Remus moved against him and Sirius moved back without even thinking. He was forceful and demanding in a way that Sirius could never have anticipated – pulling at the fabric of his t-shirt, biting at his lower lip, sliding his hand around to grab at the back of Sirius' neck. It was unexpected; surprising; overwhelming. It was spec-*fucking*-tacular.

And when he opened his eyes what felt like a lifetime later, he was amazed to find that the world still stood around them. The smell of bacon still hung in the air; the heating was still broken; the tap still dripped. Nothing had changed, except everything.

Remus was there in his vision, smiling with his eyes bright and his hair a mess, so close that Sirius could count every single freckle that scattered across his nose. He understood then what was meant when people spoke of their hearts being full – his own felt so full it threatened to burst right through him. In the end, he didn't say 'I love you'. But he would. Oh, he most *certainly* would.

“I'm sorry it took me so long,” he said, into the warm and heavy air between them.

Remus shrugged, winding his hands through Sirius' hair.

“Worth the wait,” he said.

Sirius grinned. “D'you reckon?”

“Well,” Remus said, grinning right back at him, “Let's find out.”

He tugged at Sirius' neck and pulled him in – a non verbal demand with which Sirius was more than happy to comply – but their lips only touched for the briefest of moments before the noise of a loudly opened door diverted their attention.

Peter stumbled out of the living room. Sirius could have killed him, were it not for the most amusing picture he painted. He had a penis drawn on his face, lipstick smeared across his mouth, beer stains all over his shirt and a pair of Christmas antlers on top of his head. How they had managed to stay on through a full 8 hours sleep was beyond Sirius – but then, most things about Peter Pettigrew generally were.

He rubbed his eyes, yawned into the back of his hand and blinked over at them.

“Morning,” he said. “What did I miss?”

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Well, here we go. When I originally wrote this story this chapter was envisaged as an epilogue, and I think it probably does feel that way, though it ended up being quite long. I've loved writing it, and the support & kindness I've received from you handsome sons of bitches have just been unreal. I'm so grateful. I'm so, so grateful.

And, again, I have to be incredibly lame & just point out that this story would not have been possible without my dear chum Hazz - also known as professorcockblock on tumblr. This fic has been as much a friendship fic as anything else, and the only reason I have the nerve to attempt to articulate just how amazing it is to have real, true friends in your life is because of her. She is, in a word, magnificent.

And so are all of you. Thank you for reading.

“Gentlemen! Brethren! Comrades!”

“What's a comrade?”

“Fuck's sake Wormtail, how did you get in a nywhere ?”

“Stop bickering!” James demanded, glaring between Sirius and Peter, “Tonight we are brothers in arms!”

“We're brothers in arms every night,” Remus pointed out.

“Yes!” agreed James, pointing violently in Remus' direction, “That is exactly the kind of attitude I want. Not this infernal racket you two insist upon.”

“Aww, I'm sorry Wormy, I didn't mean it,” cooed Sirius, leaning over to press a wet and sloppy kiss to Peter's cheek.

“I did,” said Peter, wiping at his cheek, “What's a comrade?”

“I'll tell you later,” promised Remus. There was a long, long list of things he still had to tell Peter later. Maybe one day he'd write a book.

It had been two and a half weeks since The Morning After The Night Before. James was with Lily and Sirius was with Remus and Peter was still besotted with that flighty mistress, geography. Rumour had it he'd even gone and bought a book.

The times, they were a-changing. Work was finished, Gilmore Girls had ceased its endless repeats on E4 and bags were packed. It was weird for Sirius – walking into the bedrooms of his friends (and now boyfriend – still odd, but he was getting used to it) and seeing empty wardrobes, non-existent mess and posters ripped down from walls. It all seemed to be happening at an alarmingly fast rate, but he no longer felt like he was being left behind. He had anchored himself to the Good Ship Moony, and so wouldn't be drowning any time soon.

Mr and Mrs Potter had returned from their various excursions with arms piled high with presents and affection, meaning that Sirius and James now were significantly better fed, but also that they'd had to find a different location for their final goodbye. Much head scratching and 'hmm'ing had taken place and until Remus had suggested it, and then it had seemed like the most obvious place in the world.

The Castle. Duh.

Perched on the top of the Princess Tower, the countryside stretched out for miles around them into the night, punctuated by city lights clustered together like beacons through the dark. It was the perfect kind of September night, where they could bundle up in jumpers (much to Remus' delight) but not even contemplate needing scarves (much to Peter's – they'd yet to find one that didn't make his face look like the moon). Sirius wasn't cold, but he used the slight chill as an incredibly convenient excuse to press his body against Remus' all the same.

“Oi!” James said, narrowing his eyes, “No couple-y shit, remember?”

James had wanted to bring Lily, and then when he was shouted down by the three had voted to ban couples all together, until Remus had pointed out that this meant either he or Sirius would be unable to attend, thus rendering the whole thing void. James had been forced to concede grumpily to this point, and had proceeded to write up a long list of things that they would not be allowed to do, on pain of death.

“It's cold!” Sirius protested.

“It bloody well is not,” said James, “And besides, cuddling up for warmth was number nineteen on the list.”

Remus shoved at Sirius' shoulder. “He's right, you know. It was.”

“Turned on by best friend and boyfriend. Have I nothing left?!” Sirius wailed, then turned to Peter for support. He rested his head on his friend's shoulder. “You'll never leave me, will you Pete?”

“Never,” he replied, patting Sirius' hand with all the reserved fondness of an unpleasant grandmother.

“Are none of us free from your advances now, Black?” asked James.

“Nope. No one is safe.”

“Uh oh, watch out Moony,” warned Peter, “Your bloke's on the prowl.”

“He won't go far,” shrugged Remus, and it was absolutely true.

It was so strange to think that by this time tomorrow James, Peter and Remus would all be off at their respective universities, and when Sirius would see them again was mostly unclear. Obviously he'd be visiting all the time, but 'all the time' was a pretty vague statement when you really considered it. Fortunately the three students all had a reading week at the same time, but that wasn't for an entire month yet. A month until the four of them would be reunited again. It was the longest time they'd spent apart since meeting – which was a very unnerving thing to consider.

Remus prodded Sirius' leg with his foot.

“Are you going to tell them or should I?” he asked.

James gasped and nearly fell over – quite impressive, considering he was sitting down.

“You're pregnant !” he squealed, clapping his hands together in glee, “Oh I knew it, I *knew* it – Peter, didn't I say? Oh I'm so excited, we're having a baby!”

“Blimey Remus, you don't waste much time,” said Pete, clapping Remus on the back as James flailed around.

“Thanks, Pete.”

“Hey! Why am I the girl?!” Sirius demanded.

“Oh, come on, dear,” said Remus, eyes glittering as he grinned over at Sirius, “We both know...”

Sirius frowned. “Well. I still resent it.”

“ Anyway ,” Remus pressed on, “No, there's no child as of yet. Much bigger news than that. Sirius?”

Ever since they'd got together, Remus had been on at Sirius about going to Oxford. He had begged and pleaded and at one point even got down on his knees (which had momentarily made Sirius very happy indeed, until he realized what was happening) in his desperation to get him to attend. Privately Sirius suspected it was just so he could be invited to the fancy Oxfordian dinners and drool at the men on the rowing team – that was, if Sirius didn't get there first, of course (there really was a whole new world of possibilities open to him now). Remus had insisted this wasn't the case, however, and in the end they had reached a compromise.

“I'm taking a gap year,” Sirius announced.

“Well we knew that,” said James, “Your whole life from now on is going to be one great big

gap year.”

Sirius directed a firm middle finger in his direction.

“Be quiet, dick face,” he said, “No – I'm taking a gap year, as in, a gap between school and – alas – more school.”

“He's going to Oxford!” Remus blurted out.

Sirius stared at him.

“Sorry,” he said, “I got too excited. Had a bit of a Wormtail moment.”

“Hey!” Peter protested, as James laughed. Peter didn't stay angry too long – Remus' smile was too kind and endearing, and it made fury very difficult. Sirius knew how he felt. “We are not calling it that.”

“Oxford, eh?” said James, looking at Sirius with an eyebrow raised, “Mr Black, I am surprised at you.”

Sirius pulled a face. “I know, I know,” he said, “I'm at least going to try and go to a college that isn't Magdalen, so I'm breaking the tradition there, at least? But you know. Figured I'd give it a go. Just another place to break rules really, ain't it?”

Remus looked deeply, deeply miserable at that, but James nodded and applauded.

“What are you gonna do till then?” asked Peter.

Sirius shrugged. “Don't know, really,” he said, “Finally get my motorbike license?”

“So you can stop singing Time Of My Life to it lovingly when you think I can't hear you?” asked James.

“I knew you could hear!” Sirius protested, though he had of course had no idea, “Anyway I know you love it. You'll miss it everyday.”

“I will,” said James, and the knowing smile he gave Sirius then made it quite plain that he wasn't totally joking.

“What else?” Peter asked.

“Pining for Moony, obviously,” said Sirius.

“Naturally,” Remus agreed.

“And visiting all of you at uni in equal measures because I love you equally .”

Peter looked visibly relieved at this.

“Oi,” murmured Remus, so only Sirius could hear as James and Peter embarked on a conversation about how long it would take to get from London to Aberystwyth.

Sirius just smiled at Remus. Neither of them had said it yet, but it was definitely there, layered beneath everything they said and everything they did.

“Well I'll obviously come to you first ,” Sirius said just as quietly, but sadly his sleuth skills temporarily broke down and it did not go unnoticed.

“Oi!” James growled, “ No couple stuff !”

This time it was Remus' turn to give him the middle finger, and James just stuck his tongue out in response.

“I was just telling my dear friend here,” said Sirius, “Of how I will in reality be far too busy to see any of you because I'll be working!”

“You'll be working?” asked James, frowning slightly, “What – here?”

“No!” Sirius replied, “No, Jesus, that would be such a betrayal. I'm gonna be working at Madam Puddifoots.”

“Madam Puddifoots?” James repeated, and Sirius nodded.

“So you're going to be... Mister Puddifoot?” he asked, and Sirius felt Remus start laughing quietly beside him.

“Yes,” said Sirius, indignantly, “And it is going to be Bad Ass. I am going to makes scones the likes of which you ain't never seen before.”

“It's gonna be hot,” Remus confirmed, and Sirius nodded. “Very,” he said.

“Hey!” James said, “Can we call you Puddifoot from now on?”

Sirius' eyes lit up. “Like a nickname?” he asked, “ Have I finally got a nickname ?!”

It had long been his deepest lamentation that the other three had nicknames and he didn't. Puddifoot probably didn't quite strike fear into the hearts of men in the way that he had hoped his nickname would, but this was their last night together, and something was better than nothing.

“It's shit,” Remus decided thoughtfully, “But it'll do.”

“Aww, is that how you feel about Sirius?” James teased.

“Yes,” Remus said, and Sirius scowled. It would have been nice if he'd have at least pretended to hesitate. Of course, the little finger that curled sneakily around his own little

finger at that moment promptly eased the scowl from his face.

“Wait, what was it?” Peter asked. He'd been rummaging around in his bag for something and – being totally incapable of doing two things at once – had therefore only caught the tail end of the conversation. “Padfoot?”

“Padfoot?” James repeated, curling his lip, “What the fuck is a Padfoot ?”

“That's just noise , Wormtail,” said Sirius, “It doesn't even make any sense!”

“Whereas Puddifoot,” Remus pointed out, “Makes a whole world of sense.”

“Exactly,” said Sirius.

“Oh, well. Here you go then, Puddifoot,” said Peter, handing Sirius one of the four beer cans he had unearthed from his bag rummage.

Sirius took it like he was handling a newborn baby – though, actually, with a bit more vigour than that. The same level of reverence, though.

“You know,” he observed, cracking it open as Peter handed them out, “I really thought drinking would become boring once we reached 18. And it totally hasn't.”

“On your feet, men!” James demanded, standing up.

Sirius groaned. “Nooo,” he complained, “Too old, too feeble, too lazy. Nooo.”

Remus seized him by the arm and hoisted him up. His well-concealed strength was continuing to surprise and delight Sirius on a daily basis – and, oh, if only he knew the kind of wank fodder he was providing when he utilised those strong arms so casually.

“I would like to propose a toast,” said James, as Peter took a swig of his beer and promptly hiccupped, “To this summer. It has been mental, it has been hilarious, it has been magnificent. Much like each of us. Much like – in fact – the seven years I've known you.”

James' knack for public speaking combined with Remus' fierce intelligence had made them a winning debate team back in school. Somehow James' stupid little voice possessed the ability to make the most ridiculous situation grave; and the most grave situation ridiculous. When he looked at them all now, speaking in his slow and omniscient tone that reminded Sirius inexplicably of a stag, he felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

“It's been a privilege, men,” he continued, “A privilege and an honour.”

“Crikey, Prongs, we're not going to war...” muttered Peter.

“Shh!” Sirius said, “You're ruining it!”

James ploughed on.

“Thanks for being there,” he said, earnestly, “Through the Lily thing, you know, it meant – and still means – everything, to me.”

It was a sentence that ordinarily Sirius would have mercilessly taken the piss out of, but he couldn't bring himself to do it now. He found Remus' hand, and held it tight.

“You make me better. Every single one of you. I've honestly had the time of my life,” he said, and met Sirius' eyes, “And I owe it all to you.”

The three made simultaneous retching noises, and James scowled.

“Alright, alright, fuck off, the lot of you,” he said, “Well – I don't have anything more to say, I just wanted to say that. I'm glad you all found it so amusing .”

He took a swig of his beer.

“I think we all know what needs to be said now,” said Remus, looking around the group.

There was silence for a second, and then it seemed to dawn on them all at once.

“Nitwit,” said James, raising his beer into the space between them.

“Blubber,” added Peter, knocking his can against James'.

“Oddment,” continued Remus, holding his can to the other two.

Sirius looked at them all – arms raised, pathetic little beer cans held together in the September air, illuminated by moon and stars and the hazy, distant glow of the city. It was magnificent. They were magnificent.

He breathed in a deep lungful of memory, and raised his can to meet theirs.

“Tweak.”

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